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Doc a 'Journey' of faith

Documentary Journey to Mecca chronicles the sacred Hajj

By **BRUCE KIRKLAND** -- Sun Media

In a complex world of religious mistrust, misunderstanding and violence, the new IMAX film *Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta* is about peace and enlightenment.

This beautifully wrought film, which dramatizes the historic story of a Muslim on his pilgrimage to Mecca, opens tomorrow at the Ontario Science Centre. It is linked to the Sultans of Science exhibit.

Visual beauty is de rigueur for IMAX productions but still challenging to achieve because of the complexity of the equipment and the rugged places where the filmmakers must go.

In the case of *Journey to Mecca* -- filmed in the deserts of Morocco and in the sea of humanity walking in reverence and prayer around the Ka'bah at Mecca in Saudi Arabia -- those places had their own unique obstacles. It took years of negotiations for the international team of filmmakers to win their unprecedented access.

The results are now on screen -- spectacularly. But there is a new twist in the saga. According to Canadian co-producer Jonathan Barker (Canada plays a crucial role in this project), they need the Toronto public, and also school groups, to come in big numbers. The more who come, the more screenings the Science Centre will schedule, Barker says. The film's fate here depends on audiences.

Journey to Mecca is a combination of drama and documentary. The bookends are scenes of the modern Hajj -- the 1,400-year-old ritual that all Muslims undertake at least once in their lives, if possible. The Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca to celebrate the prophet Abraham, who is said to have built the Ka'bah with his son Ishmael on the site of a shrine built by Adam. In essence, this Islamic ritual is at the roots of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

The core story takes us back to 1325. That is when a young Moroccan law student, the real-life Ibn Battuta who is played by Chems Eddine Zinoun, set out from Tangier. It was the first of what would become six visits to perform the Hajj. It took him 18 months to travel a circuitous 5,000-mile route to Mecca. Battuta, who eventually became the most well-travelled person in antiquity, would not return home for 29 years. Along the way, going three times as far as Marco Polo, Battuta sought out knowledge and eventually compiled his experiences in *The Rihla*, one of the most significant travel books ever written.

While there are fictional characters -- including the Highwayman played by Hassam Ghancy as a composite of strangers Battuta actually met -- the film does represent a true story. The detail, in everything from clothing to architecture, is meticulously researched. So is the re-creation of the storied Damascus camel caravan that took pilgrims across the desert to Mecca for centuries. Most importantly, religious consultants ensured that the filmmakers properly represented the Muslim faith.

There is real-life tragedy involved, too. Zinoun, the wonderful Moroccan actor who plays Battuta as a serene, inspirational character, died in a Casablanca car accident on Nov. 11. He never got to see *Journey to Mecca* make its world premiere in Abu Dhabi in December. The film is now dedicated to him. Everyone, no matter his or her faith, should see it in his honour.



