

## **For spiritual seekers and popcorn munchers - Globe and Mail**

*Stephen Cole - 5 Feb 2009*

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The tale of a 14th-century Muslim traveller who followed the sun and stars for 30 years, searching for spiritual contentment, *Journey to Mecca: in the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta* has been endorsed by the Dalai Lama and the former archbishop of Canterbury.

But don't let that discourage all you temporal pleasure-seekers out there. The 45-minute Imax film, now playing at Toronto's Ontario Science Centre in conjunction with the exhibit *Sultans of Science (Islamic Science Rediscovered)*, has the cheery innocence and dramatic sweep of a Saturdayafternoon kids matinee.

Which way is Mecca? Look up ... way up Our journey opens in Tangier, in 1325, with an irrepressible young lawyer, Ibn Battuta (Chems Eddine Zinoun), mounting a prancing steed in search of Mecca, the historical and cultural centre of Islam. His progress is charted with a spreading line on a map; the same way valiant heroes galloped the globe in old black-and-white Warner Bros. adventures.

Did someone say adventure? Before completing his epic journey, Ibn will be chased down by black-cloaked highwaymen. He will endure blinding sandstorms, cross vertiginous mountains, be tempted by mirages in broiling deserts. And, at night, our hero will sit mesmerized on cooling sand dunes, his young heart soaring, staring at a sky splashed with stars.

Of course, the big kick here is that *Journey to Mecca* is way more than an old sword-and-sandal epic on a small TV. It's an Imax film stretched taut on a huge domed screen — a canvas for which filmmaker-showman Cecil B. DeMille would have traded any one of the Ten Commandments. Watching Ibn cross the mountains, we feel as if we're *Eight Miles High*. The sand storm has us searching our pockets for Murine.

The filmmakers have also adopted a visual style that explains away *Journey to Mecca's* narrative difficulties. Ibn would say in his memoir, *Rihla* ( *Journey*), that he

often flew to Mecca in his mind. The movie makes his dream real, filming his trek with fast-moving aerial cameras. The film seems like a hallucination. And so we're hardly bothered that one of Ibn's many spiritual journeys, a trek that took a year in real time, lasts three-quarters of an hour on film. (Because 15 minutes of Imax film requires a mile of tape, movies in this format tend to max out at 45 minutes.) Nor are we much concerned when a trip that began in the 14th century ends up in modern times, as Ibn emerges in a miles-long ribbon of actual pilgrims, in 2007.

The filming of the Hajj, the act of supplication that every Muslim of means must perform, completes Journey to Mecca's trance motif, as the film is suddenly speeded up and tens of thousands of pilgrims are set in motion, turning the march around the Kaaba into a wild-spinning carousel ride. The scene is meant to mirror an earlier sequence, where Ibn watches pinwheeling stars light up the desert night. The film's message would seem to be faith is universal. And Journey to Mecca is sure to gladden the hearts of spiritual-seekers. Mere popcorn enthusiasts will like it too.

Journey to Mecca is scheduled for release at Imax theatres in Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal and Ottawa later in 2009, with more cities to be announced in coming months.