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The Long, Dusty Trek Toward Tolerance - The New York Times

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IN the parlance of the war in Iraq, firing on the enemy is —lighting up a hajji.

" Unlike dehumanizing insults adopted by Americans in other wars, —hajji" is actually an honorific. It is added to the name of one who has made the hajj, the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca.

Erasing that kind of prejudice is the reason Taran Davies — a half- English, half- American graduate of Eton and Harvard who was raised in the Church of England — has devoted himself to making films about Islam.

His travels around the Muslim world have led to five documentaries, each shot with a larger and larger camera. His first, —Around the Sacred Sea" in 1994, chronicled his five-month horseback trek around Lake Baikal in Siberia with a few Harvard classmates after their graduation in 1993. The others have taken him to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (—The Land Beyond the River"), Afghanistan (—Afghan Stories") and Chechnya (—Mountain Men and Holy Wars"). Everywhere he went, he said, —all the roads I was on led to Mecca — and if we are to understand anything about the Islamic world, we need to understand the hajj.

" His latest and most ambitious project, —Journey to Mecca," strives to impress Westerners with a side of Islam that he thinks gets short shrift in the news coverage of Islamic fundamentalism, focusing on the respect with which millions of Muslim pilgrims treat one another and how the hajj unites Muslims, Jews and Christians. The hajj has been filmed before; crowd shots from rooftop cameras are a staple of Arab news channels. But Mr. Davies and his director, Bruce Neibaur, have done it for the first time in Imax, a format in which the vastnesses of deserts and seas show up superbly on vastnesses of screen and in which aerial shots capture every face in a crowd. But it's also a format that uses 85-pound cameras that must be reloaded every three minutes.

The hajj lasts a mere five days, during which almost three million people pour into a small city, putting any crew under terrific time and crowdnavigation pressures. And, to add one more difficulty level, as non- Dominic Cunningham-Reid, left, and Taran Davies, producers of "Journey to Mecca." Muslims, Mr. Davies and his co-producer, Dominic Cunningham-Reid, could not enter.

The \$13 million to make the 45-minute film was raised from private investors — Muslim and non-Muslim — in Morocco, France, the United States, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Distributed by SK Films and National Geographic and narrated by Ben Kingsley, the film had its premiere last month in Abu Dhabi and just won a competition in Paris against 11 giant-screen competitors. It is showing now in Dearborn, Mich., and in Toronto, and Mr. Davies is hunting for bookings at other Imax theaters.

It comes with quite an official endorsement: In a Jan. 29 letter to the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, where it was shown privately last month, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence and ambassador to Britain and the United States and now chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, wrote, —Not only does the film represent an accurate and respectful portrayal of Islam, it provides a wonderful opportunity for Muslims to celebrate a revered hero in Ibn Battuta and to honor our faith.

" To make a compelling story line, footage of the 2007 pilgrimage is woven into a biography of Ibn Battuta, a religious but brashly overconfident young man of wealth and connections in Tangier who in 1325 set out to make the 3,000-mile journey alone.

After his first pilgrimage Ibn Battuta became Islam's Marco Polo, traveling 75,000 miles over 29 years to Europe, India and China before compiling his memoirs in the *Rihla*, a 14th-century classic.

But the film concentrates only on his first hajj and recreates its high points — wild dashes pursued by highwaymen through the Atlas Mountains; a felucca ride up the languid Nile; ancient Damascus by night; the Grand Mosque of Mecca as it was in 1326.

Some of this is fairly standard Hollywood stuff. A four-inch-deep Moroccan stream was dammed to make a six-foot-deep trench, the water dyed green and lined with palms to resemble the Nile. And 200 artisans recreated the Grand Mosque, with 161 marbleized columns. But some of it required superhuman effort. The caravan — more than double the size of the one in —Lawrence of Arabia," Mr. Davies said — included 320 camels and 660 donkeys, horses, sheep and goats. There were also 500 humans in period costume, and every 20th had a two-way radio tucked into his robes so that when the director called —Cut!" the long, winding line could halt without caroming into a cartoon pileup.

The film includes a stunning flyover shot taken just above the camels' heads. How to keep the beasts from bolting? —The trick was getting them used to the noise," Mr. Cunningham-Reid said. —We started high, then crept lower and lower. Eventually they got bored.

" Mecca presented a different set of challenges. The filmmakers didn't want the standard news shots, but to have their own cinematographers with the big cameras on bigger Steadicam mounts mingling with the thousands of pilgrims circling the Kabaa, the great black-curtained cube at the epicenter of Islam, and stoning the desert pillars where the Devil is said to have appeared to Abraham. They wanted aerial shots swooping past the Grand Mosque and right over the crowds on Mount Arafat, where Muhammad is believed to have delivered his farewell sermon.

At first, Mr. Cunningham-Reid said, —we were met with suspicion, resistance and inactivity." He spent two years living in Saudi Arabia, a quest he called —A Million Cups of Tea," seeking permissions from the 16 ministries that control different aspects of the hajj, all for what became 10 minutes of film. —In Arab countries you get things done by building friendships," Mr. Cunningham-Reid said.

Because he, Mr. Neibaur and Mr. Davies were barred entry, they trained three all-Muslim crews in the Imax format and kept in touch by cellphone from 10 miles away.

The most devastating blow came just three weeks before shooting began: their rented oil-company helicopter was barred from Mecca airspace.

In dismay they asked the Royal Saudi Air Force for help. They were lent a Vietnam-era Huey with a bad case of the shakes. But it came with two gungho pilots who considered the mission an honor. —Even if we'd had the perfect helicopter from Europe or the States, we wouldn't have gotten better pictures," he said.

Mr. Davies, who lives in a TriBeCa loft with a table about the size of the Sahara and bits of African and Middle Eastern art, had taken a job in banking in 1996, pursuing filmmaking only on the side. But then came Sept. 11. When the towers fell — he was only a few blocks away and fled on his bicycle — he began to feel his calling again.

It was soon very obvious that we were going to invade Afghanistan to find the culprits," he said. It was so clear what I had to do. I thought I could bring a different perspective on who the Afghans are.

" That same motivation led to —Journey to Mecca.

"Everyone said: _Aren't you insane? Isn't it dangerous? Who's even heard of Ibn Battuta?" " he said. —And now we've done all these things. We're enormously

grateful, and all the experts we've shown it to, 100 percent, feel we got it right. So we get to get beyond the conversation you see in the news about Islam as terrorism and send a message of peace. How cool is that?"