



Seeing IMAX Film a Religious Experience - Toronto Sun

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I saw a wondrous film last night. Journey To Mecca opened earlier this month at the IMAX theatre in the Ontario Science Centre. It's been about 20 years since I last saw an IMAX film and I had forgotten how staggeringly awesome the giant screen experience is.

Journey To Mecca tells the story of 14th-century traveller and writer Ibn Battuta on his pilgrimage from Tangier (in modern-day Morocco) to the holy city of Mecca (in what is now Saudia Arabia) in 1325.

It was a harrowing journey that ended up covering about 7,000 km and took Ibn Battuta through some of the wildest, most desolate, dangerous and starkly beautiful terrain in the world. The IMAX format is perfect for capturing the enormous grandeur of a North African night sky, vistas of sand and stone in unimaginable formations, and the vivid interaction of humans and animals with nature at its starkest and most ferocious.

But the most astounding images are of human beings — hundreds of thousands of modern Muslim pilgrims seen together at one time, a spectacle of humanity wrapped around you on the giant domed screen.

The filmmakers — who spent years developing and shooting this project — were granted rare permission to film at the holy sites of Mecca — the Kaaba, the Well of Zamzam and Mount Arafat among others — where about three million devout Muslims from around the world gather annually for the week of Hajj.

One scene almost beyond comprehension is a speeded-up sequence of thousands and thousands of pilgrims swirling around the Grand Mosque as

they complete their seven counter-clockwise circuits of the Kaaba. Reflecting the swirling stars of the North African night sky earlier in the film, it is an image that reminds us of how small and insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things.

The film is less than an hour long — thankfully. The scope is vast and your head jerks back and forth, up and down taking in as much of the crystal-clear detail as you can. If the film was any longer, the audience would suffer whiplash.

I attended a special screening Thursday night hosted by Gold King Peter Munk. The Munk Centre for International Studies will be providing free admission to Journey To Mecca for thousands of GTA students during the film's run at the Science Centre.

It's a grand gesture and an enormously worthwhile one. I came away from Journey To Mecca not only bedazzled but feeling immensely, almost universally serene. I know that sounds like pompous claptrap, but it's the closest I can come to describing the feeling the film left me with. Whether you're Muslim or not, I defy you to see Journey To Mecca and not be deeply, metaphysically touched by the beauty and ultimate serenity of the film.

Journey To Mecca is screened at the IMAX theatre in the Ontario Science Centre at 10 a.m. Wednesday and Thursday, and at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Journey To Mecca was directed by Bruce Neibaur and produced by Taran Davies and Dominic Cunningham-Reid of Cosmic Picture, with Jonathan Barker of distributor SK Films and Oscar winner Jake Eberts as executive producers. National Geographic will also be involved in DVD distribution of the film.