



## Cinematic odyssey posted on 07/01/2009



The story of Ibn Battuta, the Muslim world's greatest explorer, is one of faith, determination, learning and self-realisation. The Berber traveller set off from his home in 1325, aged just 21, on a pilgrimage to Mecca. After reaching his destination, he carried on travelling throughout Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. It is fitting, then, that the latest cinematic take on his epic adventure was also a revelatory experience for those who captured it. Journey to Mecca, an ultra-high-definition Imax film that was four years in the making, will premiere at the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi tonight. The brainchild of the New York-based producers Dominic Cunningham-Reid and Taran Davies (known collectively as Cosmic Picture), the 45-minute docudrama follows Ibn Battuta's route, from his native Morocco to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It was shot in the two countries and brought together a crew from more than 25 nations.

The film's centrepiece is the first-ever Imax footage of the modern-day haj, which is intercut with a recreation of the scene in Battuta's day. Filming at the 2007 pilgrimage was a feat that required the producers to spend more than two years living in Saudi Arabia, attempting to obtain permission to film the holy ritual. "It was one of the most valuable two and a half years of my life," says Cunningham-Reid.

"None of us thought it was going to take that long, but of course then we realised that things are done differently there. It was about building trust and friendship, and with that you can move forward and take on something pretty ambitious." As well as the technical difficulties associated with filming in Imax at a site bursting with about three million pilgrims, Islamic law states that only members of the faith may enter Mecca. This meant that an entirely Muslim crew had to be taught the filming technique, in order to visit and shoot the haj. "We drew up a haj filming plan, which went into every part of the detail of where we might put a camera or a crane, even down to the time of day that we might put it there. Of course, every single one of

those requests came with a lot of paperwork and a lot of lost time – and the hajj wasn't going to wait for us. It was a fantastic struggle and a very rewarding one. With the film now finished and ready to be shown, the producers admit that when they took on the challenge, they were almost setting out to achieve the impossible. An epic four-year journey that brought together people from all over the world, it is easy to draw comparisons between the ambition of the filmmakers and that of Battuta. The traveller is believed to have logged around 117,000 kilometres in his lifetime, surpassing that of his near contemporary Marco Polo.

Sadly, the film has not been without tragedy. After production wrapped, the 28-year-old Chems Eddine Zinoun, who played Ibn Battuta, died in a car accident in his native Morocco.

Although Cosmic Picture nurtured the project from infancy, there were several other parties that helped bring it to maturity. The Canadian company SK Films co-produced and released the film in association with National Geographic. The Kuwait-based Desert Door Productions also played an integral role in bringing Battuta's story to life. It is being presented in the UAE by Imagination Abu Dhabi, a part of the Abu Dhabi Media Company, the owners of The National.

The result was a collaborative effort between western and eastern filmmakers and was shot and edited with both Arabic and English-language versions. The Arabic version is voiced by the acclaimed Syrian actor Abdul Rahman al Rashi, while the English film is narrated by Sir Ben Kingsley.

Dima al Ansari, of Desert Door Productions, and co-producer of the film, was in Morocco for the filming there. As well as her official production duties, she was quickly called upon to be a translator and cultural liaison.

"We didn't want things to be misunderstood. There needed to be a specific understanding of both languages so that things wouldn't be lost in translation and so the actors understood exactly what everything meant," she says.

"The non-Arab producers needed to know exactly why certain things were important in an Islamic sense. That could mean two days of fighting over a small detail."

The film was not just designed to appeal to both Arabic and English speakers. It was the filmmakers' intention to create a piece of work that would enlighten those from other faiths about the Islamic pilgrimage and also the story of Ibn Battuta.

We set out to show this side of the world to the international community," says Al Ansari.

"Battuta loved people and travelling. He threw down the walls between West and East and that is something we are trying hard to do even now," she says. "Even back then in the 14th century, we had a Muslim traveller who believed in these things. We don't have to look far into our history to show that we can be lovers of other cultures and other ways of life." – The National