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How do you make a film about Mecca – without setting foot in the holy city?

Filming Mecca, under the gaze of the entire Muslim world, the non-Muslim producers of 'Journey to Mecca' knew they were setting themselves an ambitious goal. How did they do it? **Nicholas Griffin** found out

IT is difficult to imagine what a gathering of three million people looks like, but there they were, facing the same direction, dressed all in white, slowly covering an arid mountain until it seemed to be covered in snow. The Muslim pilgrimage of the Hajj takes place only once a year, and in late 2007 it was captured by IMAX cameras, the project funded by investors from Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Dubai. Not only was it filmed in Mecca, the most sacred heart of the Muslim world, but that world was then rebuilt in the deserts of Morocco.

So it may surprise the reader to learn that the producers of *Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta* are non-Muslim Westerners: old Etonian Taran Davies and Dominic Cunningham Reid, the son of British ex-pats in Kenya. Both are self-taught documentarians: Davies has directed several acclaimed films, while Cunningham Reid, a former war reporter, has made documentaries for National Geographic.

The pair set themselves an incredibly ambitious goal: in the 45 minutes that IMAX allots, they aimed to capture the essence of Islam and the Hajj, intriguing the West and dazzling the Muslim world. But to achieve a mission like this, at a time of incredible suspicion between East and West, they would need to find a way to film in Mecca, where no non-believer may step. In addition, they would have to dare to rebuild 14th-century Mecca, dancing around Islam's lunatic fringe to avoid the *fatava* that have plagued other depictions of Islamic heritage.

Both were fully aware of the risk that their project could be rejected in the West as Muslim propaganda and in the East as either an exploitation of Islam or outright insult of the Prophet Mohammed. Still, they remained optimistic. 'We didn't think we were going to have any problems,' said Davies, over coffee in New York. 'We thought we'd find everything we needed in Saudi, from financing, locations – total cooperation.' Their first journey to Saudi Arabia

to pitch their project seemed to have gone successfully, a stream of acquiescence. But the word 'no' is rarely used in Saudi Arabia. It's just a 'yes', followed by eternal silence.

Davies and Cunningham Reid were bewildered by their lack of progress. They wanted directness, decisions. So they formed a plan: Cunningham Reid would move to Saudi Arabia full-time and not leave until he had secured permission. Davies would remain in New York, responsible for fundraising, flying in when necessary. They gave themselves a year. Cunningham Reid refers to this part of his life as 'death by a million cups of tea'. As a novice in Saudi business, Cunningham Reid came to realise that the webs of influence were infinitely more subtle than

any he had dealt with before. He began to keep a chart that he called 'the Matrix', a vast colour-coded document on how to approach different ministries, businesses, royals and potential sponsors. 'Their way of doing business is more natural,' explained Cunningham Reid, standing on a dune overlooking

their set of 14th-century Mecca. 'Friendship and business are totally intertwined. You can drop in on anyone at any time, including during meetings. Everything that you get comes out of bonds that you have made.' Although Davies had waged a thorough campaign securing letters of support from a diverse group that included notable Muslims and the Dalai Lama, he was having problems raising the money. Twice Davies had the film fully financed, and twice investors reneged on their contracts. 'No one believed that we would ever be able to make this film,' explained Davies. At the end of their third year working on the project, Cunningham Reid finally secured the 83rd and final permission slip from the last Saudi ministry. At that point, Davies still had less than a third of the budget in the bank – and the next Hajj was a month away. If they risked going forward, they would be doing so in the hope that their footage of Mecca would be so extraordinary that it could be used to attract investors who

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would complete their budget. 'The only way to prove to our investors that we could get the footage was to go ahead,' said Davies.

The first problem that they had foreseen was a major one. Only Muslims may enter Mecca. There were no Muslim IMAX cameramen. So the producers applied for permission to the US State Department and Muslim cinematographers who obtained visas were sent immediately to Los Angeles for a week-long crash course in IMAX filmmaking. If all went to plan, the director of the film, Bruce Neibaur, a Mormon from Salt Lake City, would be directing these men from a telephone in a base camp outside the perimeters of Mecca.

Davies and Cunningham Reid quickly found out just how alien the film industry was to Saudi Arabia. Apart from a single IMAX screen, there were no cinemas in a country a quarter of the size of the United States. There was, then, no understanding of the complications of filming on location, waiting for light, personnel changes – not to mention the small matter of having to shoot under security in the middle of three million pilgrims. Moreover, once the Hajj got under way, the producers found that the contracts they had secured weeks before were ignored. Even worse, it was difficult to find men willing to work. The hours the production was offering were hard – 14 hours a day – for a straight month. Fortunately, the producers ended up with a highly accomplished office run entirely by those willing to endure the hours: Saudi women.

Even as the footage of Mecca was being rushed back to Los Angeles, the producers were already at work preparing the second part of the project, the reconstruction of Mecca in Morocco. Davies and Cunningham Reid presumed that shots of three million Muslims in Mecca would be too abstract, pure spectacle, guessing that it might scare off Western distributors. So they intertwined the story of Ibn Battuta, the Muslim Marco Polo, hoping to create both an adventure story and to provide a context by showing how the rites of the Hajj had arisen.

There loomed, much more so in Morocco than Saudi Arabia, the prospect of a misstep. Saudi Arabia was a matter of reportage, but the Moroccan shoot was a question of interpretation. On the set in Morocco, the producers would

be creating a vision that would be judged by the entire Muslim world. Worryingly, the set designers soon found that there were no documents in Riyadh to which they could refer for clues as to how Mecca looked hundreds of years ago. For a country so rich in oil, little has been spent on the preservation of culture. Most of the history of Mecca has been expunged by the Saudi religious authorities. The Gulf Institute, based in Washington, estimates that 95 per cent of the buildings that stood in the time of Mohammed have been bull-dozed in the last 20 years.

After eight weeks in the Moroccan desert, Davies and Cunningham Reid pulled off something that had seemed impossible. Watching them approach the completion of their work with such sensitivity, I asked Davies what he would say to those who told him that he had just helped to produce

a magnificent piece of propaganda for a religion that wouldn't even allow him near its sacred sites. 'There's a huge gulf between Islam and the rest of the world,' he said. 'That's just a fact. This film isn't going to fill that gulf, but it can act as part of the bridge.'

Back in Morocco, I'd interrupted the actor playing Ibn Battuta and Taran Davies on the set. I asked

the former about the responsibility of playing one of the greatest Muslim heroes in a film that seeks to represent all of Islam. 'Battuta' told me that there was nothing to worry about, since there was nothing he could do about the fate of the film. 'I'm a Muslim,' he said, 'and I'm going to die a Muslim.' 'Probably rather soon,' joked Davies, and the two exploded into laughter. 'You'll be first,' said 'Battuta' with a broad smile. 'You're the producer.'

Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta is at the BFI IMAX cinema in Waterloo until 2011

Nicholas Griffin is the author of five books, including *Caucasus*

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The Safa-Marwa, part of the Hajj (opposite, left); 'Ibn Battuta', played by Chems Eddine Zinoun (opposite, right); Filming on Mount Arafat, Mecca (above)