

# One Day in the Haram

## INTERVIEW WITH ABRAR HUSSAIN

DIRECTOR, *ONE DAY IN THE HARAM* (2017)

Please provide a general overview of the film.

**O**ne Day in the Haram is a unique feature length documentary film that tells the story of the Grand Mosque in Makkah (Haram), from the perspective of its workers. These workers represent the human face of the Haram, and the film explores the work they do as well as their spiritual motivations. The film is structured across the five daily Islamic prayers, focusing on the jobs carried out by different departments of the Haram within these time frames. The film was organised as a collaboration between Arabia Pictures and Al Reasah Haramain (General Presidency of the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques) and directly supervised by its President, Sheikh Abdulrahman Al-Sudais. As part of the pre-production for the film I spent over a year researching every aspect of the Haram and interviewing countless employees, to ensure that we produced the most complete and compelling vision of the Haram ever put on film.

What did you observe to be the nature of interaction between the workers and the pilgrims?

The general feeling was that all of the workers in the Haram, regardless of seniority, are there to serve the pilgrims. Their overall objective is to be as welcoming and as helpful as possible to the pilgrims. Hospitality is something of an art form in Makkah. Yet it is not always easy for the workers, especially those on the ground, as the pilgrims speak a multitude of different languages - there was no common language with which all could communicate. After all, Makkah is perhaps the most unique mesh of cultures and backgrounds anywhere in the world! But the response I received time and time again from the workers, when asked about their motivations, was that they saw it as an honour and a responsibility to be working in the Haram. Many firmly believed that they had been selected by God as one of the chosen few to look after His House and His pilgrims. So there is a great sense of duty, and this comes across in how they interact with the pilgrims. The other notable response was that many of the workers believed that they had reached the pinnacle of their careers by working in the Haram; that there was nowhere higher or better for them to aspire to.

What are your main impressions of Makkah when filming it from the ground and sky?

When in Makkah it really feels like you are at the centre of the world;

the weight of the history and significance of the place is really very extraordinary. It feels like you are in a spiritual bubble, and that nothing exists outside of this bubble. On the ground, the most mesmerising sight was that of the Kaaba. From whichever angle you look at it, the Kaaba is truly a magnificent structure, at once both majestic and serene. Often in the middle of filming I would simply gaze at it, allowing its power to wash over me, to inspire me. From the sky you get a sense of the location of the Haram within Makkah, and the mountains that surround the city. The Haram is the centre point of the city, and you can see how the city has grown around it - as if it were literally carved from the mountains. The city is filled with the sacred history of Islam, and you feel the weight of this history when you gaze across the landscapes of the region.

What are the main misconceptions people have about Makkah?

I think the main misconception, especially in the West, is that Makkah is seen as a city of the past. People don't realise just how technologically advanced the city is, and how developed the infrastructure is. This is a place where history and culture intertwine seamlessly with modernity. With regards to the Haram, one of the eye-opening discoveries of the film was just how advanced the systems that power the Haram are. For example the sound or the air conditioning are tailored to delivering the best possible experience and comfort for the pilgrims. No expense has been spared to ensure the use of some of the most robust and technically advanced systems in the world.

As a filmmaker, how has Makkah inspired your artistic creativity?

As a Muslim, I always grew up believing that you had to be invited by God to visit Makkah. Metaphysically, no one arrives in Makkah unannounced. So the first thing was an incredible sense of honour at being able to direct this film; to not just be invited to this holy city, but to be part of the team that would showcase it to the world. It was an immense responsibility, and one I pray we did justice to. When I reflect on the actual creative process of the film, I recall going to sleep one night, with absolutely no creative ideas about the film, and when I woke up in the morning I had everything. I suddenly knew the entire concept of the film; that it would be set in one day, that it would be structured around the five prayers, that it would be from the perspective of the workers - everything! So, in truth, I credit all the good things that came creatively to the project to God, and any mistakes or shortcomings to be my own. **E**