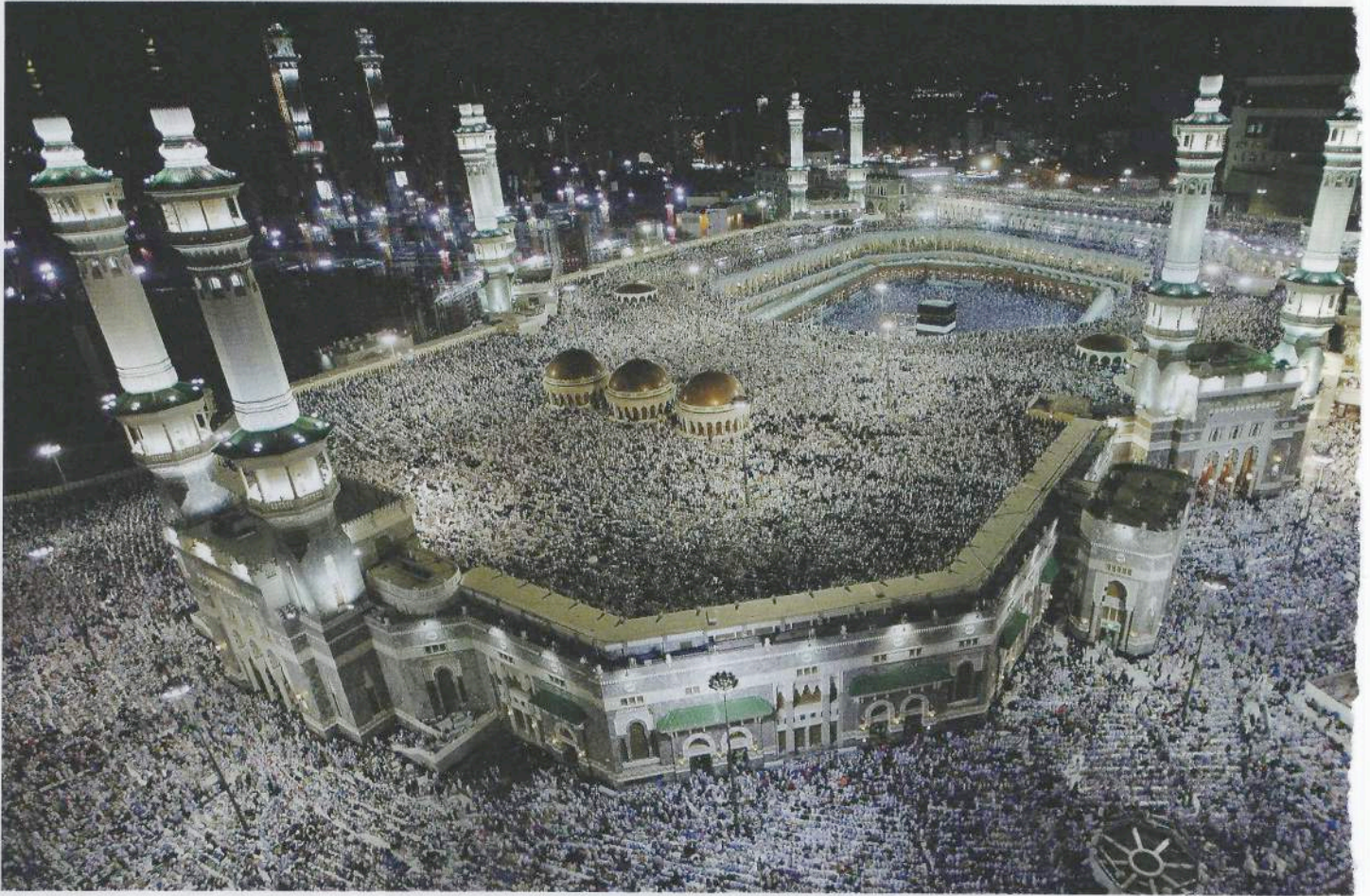


Exhibitions



Pilgrim's Progress. The hajj revealed in a splendid new exhibition

By William Green

IN 2011, NEARLY 3 MILLION MUSLIMS made the pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca. Worshippers from almost every land traveled to this holy city in the Saudi Arabian desert: 222,600 from Indonesia alone; 99,000 from Nigeria; 13,800 from China. Yet to non-Muslims, Mecca is a mystery. One of the first to glimpse its wonders was the British explorer Richard Burton, who ventured there in 1853, disguised as an Afghan doctor. In his best-selling account, he recalled: "A blunder, a hasty action, a misjudged word, a prayer or bow, not strictly the right shibboleth, and my bones would have whitened the desert sand."

Non-Muslims are still forbidden to visit

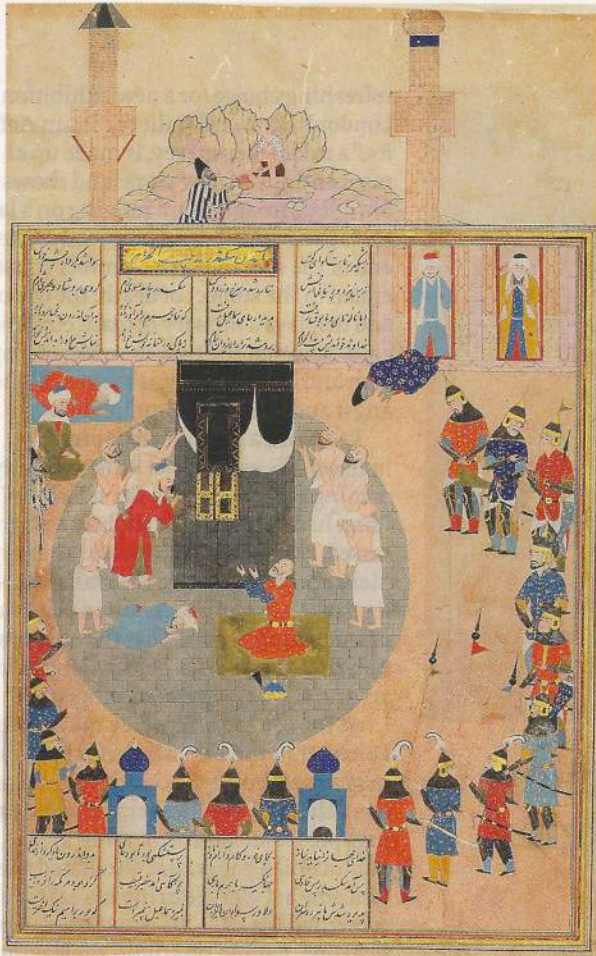
Mecca. But a captivating alternative now exists for those curious about the experience—the exhibition "Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam," which runs until April 15 at London's British Museum. It's a stunning show, featuring an extraordinary range of objects—from priceless paintings to humble items like Burton's own battered metal flask, which he filled with water from Zamzam, Mecca's sacred well. Beside this flask stands a cotton-and-velvet helmet, once dipped in Zamzam water to protect its owner. Tipu Sultan, the Muslim ruler of Mysore. The British killed him in 1799 and stole the helmet as a souvenir.

The focal point of Mecca is the black granite Kaaba, a cuboid building that

Muslims believe was constructed by Adam after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, then rebuilt by Abraham. The site attracted devotees even before the birth of Islam. An exquisite painting from around 1550 depicts Alexander the Great kneeling beside the Kaaba in prayer, while his soldiers stand back in awe. It was the Prophet Muhammad who established the Kaaba as the center of Islam. Born in Mecca, he performed the hajj in 632 and stipulated that every Muslim must make this pilgrimage at least once.

In their fervor, the pilgrims—or hajjis—braved storms, plague and Bedouin bandits. Some perished, and the exhibition touchingly includes the tombstone of an unnamed visitor buried in Mecca 900 years ago. Other travelers were anything but anonymous. One celebrity pilgrim was the African King Mansu Musa, who embarked from Timbuktu in 1324 with 500 slaves, dispensing so much gold

Spiritual riches
Items on show include paintings, textiles and, below, an ancient copy of the Koran

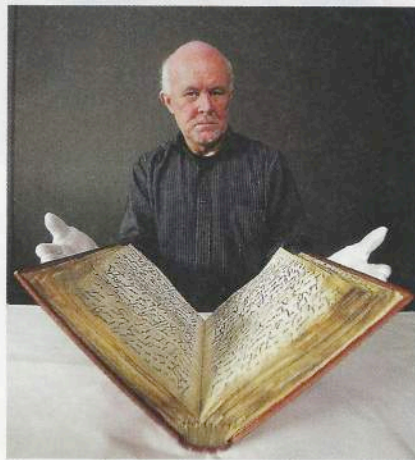


along the way that the commodity price plunged in Egypt. A map from 1525 portrays him clutching his bullion.

One of the loveliest treasures on display is *The Pilgrim's Companion*, a guidebook written during a yearlong hajj in 1676. The Indian author shares tips on how to avoid getting cheated by ship captains, fend off attackers and bail out water. The manuscript also includes wonderfully detailed paintings depicting hajjis at sea and camping with camels.

Venetia Porter, the exhibition's curator, says her toughest challenge was selecting objects to tell the story of a spiritual journey in a way that's "evocative to non-Muslims." She's particularly moved by such simple items as a photograph of pilgrims crossing the desert in 1909: privileged hajjis perch on camels and carry parasols, while poorer ones walk alongside. As Porter says, "You feel you're with them."

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Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, is dazzled by a vast silk curtain made in 1857 to cover the door of the Kaaba. Sumptuously embroidered in gold and silver thread, it was commissioned by an Ottoman sultan. MacGregor draws a connection between this "marvelous" textile and the painting of Alexander the Great praying at the Kaaba. In both cases, he says, "the supreme earthly power submits and respects a higher power. It's a very moving idea."

What makes the exhibition so enthralling is this juxtaposition of sublime art and commonplace items. One moment, you marvel at a ravishing textile; the next, you see a Mecca Pilgrimage Ticket from the travel agent Thomas Cook, entitling a passenger to sail by steamboat from Bombay to Jeddah and back "during 1886." Both capture the magic of the hajj. But for non-Muslims, this view from afar will have to suffice. ■