

Culture

How Islam’s two holiest cities went virtual

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London

Italian photographer Luca Locatelli, on assignment in March for the New York Times, was granted access to Islam’s two holiest cities for a photo essay. Armed with 360-degree, virtual-reality video cameras, Locatelli, together with a local journalist and producer, spent 14 days in Mecca and Medina, creating a short film that has had millions of internet views.

Titled *Pilgrimage: A 21st Century Journey Through Mecca and Medina*, the film documents the sights and sounds of Mecca and Medina, allowing viewers to experience the journey almost as if they were there.

“As far as we knew, this had never been done in Mecca or Medina before,” Saudi journalist and television producer Essam al-Ghalib said.

“I have done a lot of production work for various global news organisations over the past decade and, when I was approached by Mr Locatelli, I knew it was something special. It was certainly the most meaningful and important project of my career as this film would help people understand Islam and Muslims like nothing I have ever worked on before.”



Luca Locatelli at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. (Photo by Seif Al-Mutairi)

Using prototype new technology cameras, Locatelli, Ghalib and Saudi film-maker Seif al-Mutairi produced a film that the New York Times has promoted in its print edition with colour full-page ads.

Using the ‘Times’ virtual-reality app or 360-degree video on YouTube or Facebook, viewers can look all around, experiencing what the team saw and heard.

“Luca showed Seif and I how to operate the GoPro 360 prototype and the Panono cameras and told us to film anything and everything we wanted. So, as Luca shot still photos at the various locations we chose, Seif and I shot the video.”

Ghalib said a problem arose that almost caused the production to be cancelled.

“Filming inside the Grand Mosque with professional cameras requires a permit and that’s where the biggest problem we faced was,”

he said. “Despite our best efforts and contacts, Luca and I couldn’t get a permit to film inside the Grand Mosque. I mean, I thought that being with [the New York Times], we would be granted a permit instantly but I was wrong.”

The team was told by the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Holy Mosque and Prophet’s Mosque that permits were issued in rare and unique situations that usually involved visiting foreign dignitaries.

“Well, as you can imagine, this was a major, major problem. How can we do a project titled *Pilgrimage* without showing the very place pilgrims make the pilgrimage to? It would be like making a film about cowboys but without guns and horses in it,” Ghalib said.

The team was cautioned by the

Ministry of Information not to attempt filming inside the Grand Mosque.

“My contact at the Ministry of Information, who was always most helpful in getting us permits, told us, ‘Don’t try shooting pictures or videos in the Grand Mosque with those cameras’,” Ghalib said.

Locatelli circled the Kaaba a few times, lowering the cameras whenever police or Grand Mosque officials approached.

There are hundreds of security cameras and live broadcast cameras in the Grand Mosque and if they were caught, it would be a big problem.

For 12 days the team tried to get a permit. With Locatelli having only two days left in Mecca, the pressure was mounting, so the team decided to take a chance.

“We decided to hide the cameras in special bags we bought and went in through the most crowded entrances and easily blended in sticking to large crowds of people,” Mutairi said.

“We figured that it would be best that Luca be the one to film inside the Grand Mosque because he was a foreigner and in his passport his visa stated he was a guest of the Ministry of Culture and Information and a photographer. It was good enough where, if anyone stopped us, they may not make an issue for us.”

With his team acting as lookouts, Locatelli circled the Kaaba a few

times, lowering the cameras whenever police or Grand Mosque officials approached.

“Personally, it was bizarre to be in the Grand Mosque breaking the rules, worrying about getting detained for doing something that we felt was essentially a service to Islam and Muslims,” Ghalib said, “but we made it out safely with the footage that you see in the film.”

Locatelli was later invited to Saudi Arabia as part of a Bloomberg News team that interviewed Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz about the Vision 2030 plan. Locatelli spent eight hours at the Royal Court photographing the prince for the article.

Since the release of the film, Ghalib said he has received positive feedback from the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information.

Foreign artists reflect on relationships with Beirut

Jimmy Dabbagh

Beirut

Many people living in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, would readily describe their relationship with the city as somewhat complicated and shrouded with instability and uncertainty. This element of unpredictability is perhaps what has attracted a wave of international artists, many of whom would cite the city’s inherent turmoil and contradictions as driving forces for their creativity.

In an abandoned 19th-century mansion of seven rooms in Beirut’s Mar Mikhael district, seven foreign artists came together in a joint art exhibition – *7 Rooms 7 Artists* – reflecting on their relationships with the city in which they choose to live and work.

The artists are German Cornelia Krafft, Lithuanian Ieva Saudargaite, Italian Marcello Carrozzini, Iranian Niloufar Afnan, Spaniard Ana Serrano and Americans Gianna Dispenza and Lee Frederix.

“I wanted to have a different eye (perception) on our city,” curator Toufic el-Zein said. “At a time when lots of young (Lebanese) are leaving the country, there are foreigners with no links to Beirut who choose to live here.

“I chose that venue because it



Outside banner of 7 Rooms 7 Artists exhibition in Beirut

represents the past splendour of Beirut, which is unfortunately deteriorating and probably won’t exist anymore. So the foreign artists had a conversation with the city, they explained what they had to say to Beirut through these rooms in this house.”

A faint, glowing light comes from a room that used to be the mansion’s kitchen, where Krafft’s *Come Home and Eat the Moon with Me, (Part III)* invites the viewer for “a symbolic meal into the oven of the family”, as the text asserts. Krafft’s work ruminates on preserving a sense of communality, tradition and memory that are threatened to disappear.

With parts of the room fashioned to resemble a traditional kitchen, Krafft achieves an authentic feel to the installation, which is offset by unusual additions to the room. At the centre, a cylindrical light structure made of overlaying loaves of bread dimly illuminates the space.

Beneath the dreamy ambience that the piece elicits, Krafft said that a harsher reality served to drive the work forward.

“I started working with Arabic bread two years ago in Berlin. The Syrian war had proceeded so much by then that daily bread was missing. It was also the link to the idea that if you have nothing left, how can you survive?” Krafft explained.

“It’s a repetition of poverty and disastrous wars and of people being left with nothing. The bread is sym-

bolic in every religion. It is coherent in everyday life. I wanted to have a broader image.”

Having returned to Germany after six years in Beirut, Krafft observed that the city left a mark on her. “Six years in Lebanon changed me so much that I am back here fully engaged as an artist,” she said. “I think for me this is the place that shows the reality of conflict, beauty and possibilities in any way of living. I find it more inspiring. It’s a love-hate relationship for sure.”

A room that holds Frederix’s *Despite All My Rage: The Lamentations of Enkidu* is less comforting. Referencing the journey of Enkidu from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and how he was tempted by Shamhat, the artist reimagines a map of Mar Mikhael using reclaimed pieces of wood that lead to a half-dug pit. Above the pit, a wooden cage attached to a pulley floats eerily.

Frederix refers to Beirut as an “organised mess”, much like the seemingly calculated visual chaos that extends throughout his installation.

“I am a bit of a gypsy by spirit,” he said. “I’ve lived in three different countries and 30 different homes in my life but I’ve been here for 15 years, so Beirut has sort of become a home for me.

“As I started developing this idea of home and sketching it out, the second idea began to crystallise, which was the idea of being trapped. I realise that the more I build myself a sense of home, meta-

phorically and physically, the harder it is to leave.”

At first glance the view of a suspended black skin of an SUV is as curious as it is arresting. Designed by Saudargaite, a Lithuanian-Lebanese artist, the installation is a powerful critique of the disruptive and corrupt nature of Lebanon’s political class. The installation refers to a controversial highway project that threatens to destroy many historic buildings in the area, including the mansion.

Many international artists cite the city’s inherent turmoil and contradictions as driving forces for their creativity.

“These are the kinds of things that the political regime does, they decide to finance projects that are not necessarily serving citizens but most likely their own benefits,” she said.

“It also stemmed from a personal frustration with living in the city and being aggressed by these political convoys that roam and rage on the roads. They occupy a lot of space and are like big bullies.”

Photographs of tinted SUVs around the room serve to emphasise the ambiguity of these vehicles.

Jimmy Dabbagh is a journalist based in Beirut and contributes cultural articles to The Arab Weekly.