

TOURISM

Keeping Up with the Indiana Joneses

Hollywood films have become “virtual brochures” that influence our choice of holiday destination. Matt Jones reports on the impact of cinema on international tourism.



Hollywood is making a deep impact on international tourism, with tinsel town's blockbuster movies playing an increasingly large role in our choice of holiday destination. To the traditional ingredients of a memorable vacation – sun, sand and sea – add another: cinema.

According to research conducted by Thomson Holidays in the UK, more than 80 per cent of Britons plan their holidays after seeing a location on the big screen. One in five admits to having made a pilgrimage to a destination they've seen on film, with New Zealand (the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy), the Greek island of Cephalonia (*Captain Corelli's Mandolin*), Thailand (*The Beach*), Malta (*Troy*) and Kenya (*Out of Africa*) topping the list of vacation spots inspired by a trip to the local multiplex, or an evening in with a DVD.

“High profile films such as *Lord Of The Rings*, *Cold Mountain* and *Troy* all show off locations in a favourable light, making them an incredibly powerful force for marketing a destination,” says Miles Morgan, Thomson's Marketing Director.

“In fact, with films effectively acting as ‘virtual brochures’, they can do much more for bookings than a large scale advertising campaign. Our national obsession with celebrities means that watching our favourite stars perform in beautiful locations is no longer enough – now we want to go along and experience the same places first-hand.”

With George Clooney due to arrive in Dubai to film the spy thriller *Syriana* in late 2004, and with the futuristic Tim Robbins-Samantha Morton thriller *Code 46* – partly filmed



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in Dubai in early 2003 – now available on DVD, Thomson's findings bode well for tourism in the emirate, especially if more Hollywood productions arrive on these shores.

In marketing cities to film companies, however, Middle East tourism and promotion bodies would do well to note the genre: films that inspire movie-goers to travel are primarily escapist adventures or romances. The five most sought after locations of specific scenes in the Thomson report were the "I'll have what she's having" café in New York from *When Harry Met Sally*, Fifth Avenue, New York, as depicted in *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, *Pretty Woman's* Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles; and, in Paris, *Amélié's* Montmartre district and the Moulin Rouge dance hall that inspired the Ewan McGregor-Nicole Kidman musical of the same name.

"Whether it's the glamour of *Breakfast At Tiffany's* or the fantasy adventures of *Lord Of The Rings*, people go to the cinema to engage in a bit of escapism," says Dan Jolin, reviews editor of the UK movie magazine *Empire*. "It makes sense then, that films should inspire us to want to properly escape to all those spectacular and interesting locations that they reveal in such rich detail."

Unfortunately for Dubai, however, *Syriana's* subject matter offers little in the way of escapism. Based on the Robert Baer book *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism* (the title says it all), the film's effectiveness in luring visitors to Dubai depends very much on how the film-makers portray both the city and its inhabitants.

The Thomson findings, published in September 2004, confirm previous research undertaken by Mintel International in October 2003. Analys-

ing travel patterns surrounding the release dates of Leonardo DiCaprio's *The Beach* and the various movies in the *Lord Of The Rings*, Harry Potter and James Bond franchises, the authors wrote, "Films have the power, through sight and sound, to transport consumers to places, and to induce visits to foreign lands. Film enables countries and regions to leverage the visibility that they provide and to boost their tourism potential. *Out of Africa* was credited with bringing American tourists back to the continent, and *Crocodile Dundee* lured tourists to

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Australia's attractions. More recently, Harry Potter brought British tourism back from the brink following the foot and mouth crisis and *Lord Of The Rings* sent a huge wave of British tourists scurrying to New Zealand."

According to Thomson, 40 per cent of the 1,530 Britons surveyed voted New Zealand as their favourite movie holiday hot spot after seeing it in director Peter Jackson's *Lord Of The Rings*. Overall, Tourism New Zealand reports a 400 per cent rise in visitors thanks to the fantasy trilogy. Myriad tour companies have sprung up in New Zealand to guide Rings fans around the 150 site locations and 35 major set locations spread throughout the country, including what remains of the "Hobbiton" village set at Matamata on North Island.

One such company is Auckland-based Red Carpet Tours. "Our aim

is to bring people from all over the world to experience the fellowship of a shared journey through the breathtaking landscapes that we all know from the movies," says the company. Confirming that life can imitate art, it adds, "You will come as strangers to a distant land and part as a band of companions who have shared a unique experience in the country that has become Middle-earth."

"The evidence, both statistical and anecdotal, indicates that films play an increasingly large role in people's choice of vacation destinations," says Peter Goddard, Managing Director of TRI Hospitality Consulting, a Dubai-based management consultancy specialising in tourism and related industries. "The sooner government ministries and national tourism authorities in the Middle East catch on to this trend, the sooner they can experience significant economic benefits from cinema tourism."

"But film-makers' interest in a country, region or city shouldn't be left to chance. If governments are serious about developing cinema tourism, they should actively promote destinations to film companies through the establishment of government-supported film commissions that would facilitate productions on the scale of a Bond or a *Mission Impossible*."

To capitalise on Harry Potter's popularity, the UK government's British Tourist Authority has issued a map of Harry Potter locations, which can be picked up in British embassies all over the world.

In the grand tradition of film-making, diverse locations throughout the UK often appear as one place on film – therefore a family vacation in search of the fictional

Hogwarts school should ideally take in Gloucester Cathedral and Lacock Abbey in south-west England as well as Alnwick Castle several hours drive away in north-east England. The train ride to the school, aboard the famed Hogwarts Express, was filmed even further north, on the bridges and viaducts of the West Highland Railway in Scotland.

Celia Stevenson of Scottish Screen, which develops, encourages and promotes every aspect of film, television and new media in Scotland, has claimed that the country is the spiritual home of Harry Potter. But two films released well before the Harry Potter phenomenon in 1995, *Rob Roy* starring Liam Neeson and *Braveheart* starring Mel Gibson, have also led to an increase in the number of visitors to the country. In research conducted in 1996, one in five tourists in Scotland said one or other of the films had prompted them to visit the country. In the midst of Harry Potter fever in 2002, Stevenson told the BBC, "In the first six months after *Braveheart* opened there was a 130 per cent increase in visitors to the Wallace monument" – the monument in Stirling that commemorates the Scottish hero portrayed by Gibson, William Wallace.

"Movie locations have become today's historic sites," writes Tony Reeves, author of *The Worldwide Guide to Movie Locations* and originator of the website www.movie-locations.com. "Travel guides map out the world for us in terms of high culture – history, architecture and literature – but there's an irresistible drive to seek out those places to which we have a more emotional link" – a link that's forged through the immediacy of the cinema experience and repeated viewings of a favourite film.



Harrison Ford and Sean Connery in Petra for *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* Studio still © and TM Lucasfilm Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

Among the locations visited by Reeves during the course of his research are the Tunisian sites that doubled for the desert planet of Tatooine in various episodes of the *Star Wars* films. Among them is the town of Matmata, where locals lived in underground homes carved out of the soft local sandstone.

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"It's hard to beat the thrill of standing in Luke Skywalker's sunken homestead from the original *Star Wars*," Reeves writes after visiting the troglodyte town. When the film was first released in 1977 he saw it on London's largest cinema screen, the Odeon Marble Arch. "When I saw the Skywalker home, it couldn't have occurred to me, in those days, that I was seeing a real place, a place that could be visited," he writes. "It's one of those rare times, like the *Jaws* locations on Martha's Vineyard, when you feel you are stepping through the screen and directly into the film."

Also in the Arab World, the fame of the ancient Nabatean rock city of Petra, in Jordan, was boosted by the prominent role it played in Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade*. Filming in front of Petra's ancient Treasury building caused a stir in 1988, with the Jordanian royal family paying a visit to the set to meet Spielberg and the film's stars, Harrison Ford and Sean Connery. Today vacationers are following in those famous footsteps. One travel company, San Francisco-based Travel In Style, includes Petra in a 12-day itinerary it calls "Egypt & Jordan al la Indiana Jones". Travel In Style's customers are, to borrow from the movie's tagline, having the adventure of their lives keeping up with the Joneses. Interestingly, Dubai can be included in the Indiana Jones itinerary, which suggests that the city is already an unlikely beneficiary of what Thomson refers to as "cinema sightseeing," even if Spielberg's fictional hero never made it to Dubai himself.

While the UAE is only beginning to attract the attention of Hollywood film-makers, Bollywood has been quicker to utilise the country as a backdrop for its films, going as far as to name one feature after the

country's most cosmopolitan city (2001's *Dubai*, starring Mammooty). According to a *Gulf News* report in March 2004, four Indian movies were concurrently being shot in the UAE, including *Rehazar*, starring Jimmy Shergill and *Tum Sa Nahin Dekha*, with Irfan Hashmi and Jia.

While there are no statistics to indicate the impact of such films on tourism from the sub-continent, greater awareness of Dubai among Indian cinema-goers can only be good for the city. The staging of Bollywood's star-studded 2004 Zee Cine Awards here, not to mention Dubai Media City's inaugural Dubai International Film Festival in December 2004, serve to further promote and glamourise the city's association with films and film stars from East, West and important movie-making nations in between, such as Egypt and Iran.

Certainly, film tourism is not a purely Western phenomenon. Mintel stated in its 2003 report, "Film tourism is a growing phenomena worldwide." It added, "Successful films have a direct and powerful role in creating and sustaining tourism to a location, be it a hotel or a continent."

Commenting on its more recent findings Thomson says, "According to this trend for cinema sightseeing, there is likely to be a surge in bookings to a number of destinations with the release of new films."

Among the destinations Thomson expects to do well from movies in 2005 are Rome and Berlin. Why? Because fans are expected to head for the sites associated with *Ocean's Twelve's* George Clooney. Clooney's next stop? Dubai. ☺

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