

EPISODE I

DUNE WALK: Tunisia doubles for the planet Tatooine in upcoming pic "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace."

# INTO THE WILDS

## Intrepid filmmakers recount their tales of high adventure on location

By PAT KRAMER

Sometimes there's just no way around it. Certain films demand exotic locations — despite the high costs, the hassles, the seemingly insurmountable problems that go with them. Here are a few tales from filmmakers who, with their 1999 movies, rushed in where most fear to tread.

"Location is reality, and reality is very hard to duplicate, especially when you are making large-scale epic movies," says LucasFilm producer Rick McCallum, whose biggest project is the upcoming "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace."

The prequel to "Star Wars" was hardly a logistical nightmare regarding foreign locations. That prize would have to go to LucasFilm's 1992 TV series "Young Indiana Jones," which shot in 30 countries. "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace," on the other hand, required only two location stints: a former

royal palace in Cearsta, Italy, where the production got its interior shots, and a scorching hot desert in Tunisia, the location for the film's main set, the planet Tatooine.

### Logistics dilemma

In trying to shoot the film in 65 days, McCallum says the challenge came in having to move all the gear quickly and efficiently back and forth between the two locales. "You have to be facile enough to move all your people quickly without all the excess baggage that films usually have. We shoot with smaller crews using a crew who know (the system). It's difficult for a lot of people if they're not used to it, especially if you have 25 to 30 tons of gear."

While in Tunisia, disaster struck when a freak hurricane with 90 mph winds hit at 3 a.m., demolishing the "Star Wars" sets. "It was painful," says McCallum, "but we never lost any time."

Windstorms also were a problem during the filming of Colum-

bia's "Hoofbeats," which takes place in Namibia's Garub Desert. Exec producer Alisa Tager recalls, "We had wild sandstorms and windstorms while our production designer, Wolf Kroeger, was trying to build this massive German mining town for us."

Due to the remoteness of this location, the production's supplies and equipment had to be trucked in from Johannesburg, South Africa, a 30-hour drive. In the end, the problems were



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worth overcoming. "Namibia is like landing on Mars," Tager says. "It's incredibly visually arresting. There are huge apricot sand dunes, red rocks and vast stretches of desert."

The element of risk is heightened when productions go on location. During the making of Hugh Hudson's "I Dreamed of

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## Advanced technology speeds up the process

By STEPHANIE ARGY

Like almost every other profession, the business of location scouting is evolving because of advances in digital technology. Traditionally, location scouts have taken photographs of possible shooting sites, taped the prints into manila folders and mailed the folders to their clients. Now, however, a few location scouts are using the Internet and other computer tools to get images out even faster.

Beth Tate began by building a database she could keep on a laptop so that if clients didn't feel like she had shown them enough options, she instantly could produce more. Soon she developed her own Web site where she could post images of locations for her clients to log on and see.

Dennis Thomann took a different approach, building up a library of images that he shoots with a digital camera. Clients who are interested in finding a location contact Thomann and tell him what they need, and he'll send them a hard copy of appropriate images from the library.

Tate and Thomann say the main advantage to their systems is it enables them to understand better what clients are looking for so they can narrow the search more quickly. "You can start to have a dialogue," Tate says. "You can really get the look focused," Thomann adds. "There are people who say you're cutting down on the amount of scouting. I don't think so. They'll still want someone to go out and look at those locations."

In addition to private databases that belong to the scouts themselves, some cities and states have libraries of their locations. The state of California, for example has a text-only database of 7,500 locations that it distributes for free over the Internet.

Other film commissions have their locations on the 'Net or on CD-ROM, but according to Marino Pascal, a commercial location scout, they may not have all the information scouts and producers need. "A few years ago, they would send us a book of contact information," he says. "Now they are afraid it will be distributed outside their control, and they give you less information."

Instead, Pascal believes that a more significant computer-based change has been an e-mail list that enables the members of this very isolated profession to stay in touch with one another. Members—who have to be nominated by two other members—recently formed the Assn. of Location Professionals, the first organization to represent exclusively location scouts and managers. Pascal says the group probably wouldn't have been created without the aid of computer communication. "Attempts had been made earlier, but it was so hard to get together," he explains.

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Dennis Thomann  
on his digital library

## 'ER' operates in Florida

By RAMIN ZAHED

ORLANDO Actor Eriq LaSalle patiently delivers a third take of an emotional scene for a May sweeps episode of "ER." However, instead of Burbank or Chicago, where the medical drama usually tapes, LaSalle is practicing his craft in a Disney-MGM Studios soundstage in Orlando.

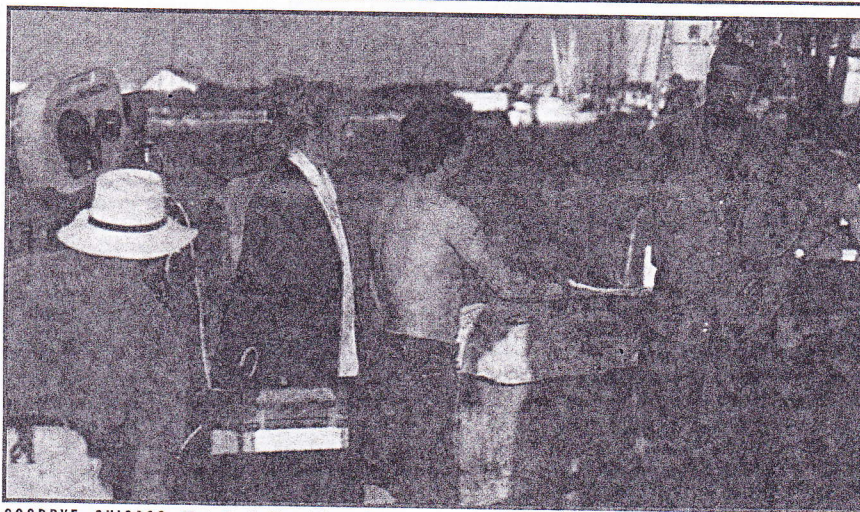
So what brings LaSalle and the "ER" crew to a spot usually associated with Disney and Universal theme parks? For one thing, the storyline for this particular episode of "ER" requires LaSalle's character (Dr. Peter Benton) to go on a leave of ab-

sence that takes the good doctor to a small town in southern Mississippi.

"We were looking for a very specific landscape, with cypress trees, shrimp boats and a remote rural feel," explains "ER" line producer Penny Adams. "The weather was certainly a big draw, because we wanted to see Dr. Benton in short sleeves rather than shooting him against the snowy backdrops of Chicago to get a bigger contrast."

Adams first started thinking about shooting the episode in central Florida back in November. "There were two major factors that made us pick Orlando," Adams says.

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GOODBYE, CHICAGO: Eriq LaSalle, right, rehearses a scene for "ER" on location in Orlando.



FROM PIOTROKOW TO JUNEAU: Left, "Jakob the Liar" producers Marcia Garces Williams and Steven Haft flank star Robin Williams in Piotrkow, Poland. Right, "Limbo" stars Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and David Strathairn rough it in Juneau, Alaska.



## Filmmakers take to the wilds on location

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Africa," a herd of wild elephants visited the set one night to meet and greet the trained elephants being using in the film. Says producer Stanley Jaffe, "You had people scampering for cover on numerous occasions that evening."

### Bureaucracy jungle

Political bureaucracy can sometimes present the greatest obstacles of all. Regarding MGM's most recent James Bond film, "Tomorrow Never Dies," producer Michael Wilson remembers, "We were all set to go to Ho Chi Min City in Hanoi and had gotten all the applications. But then, just a few weeks before we were going to go, we got all of our applications pulled." As a result, filming took place in Thailand.

Fortunately, things have proceeded more smoothly this time around for the current

Bond venture, "The World Is Not Enough." Shooting is on locations in Spain, the French Alps, London and Cappadocia, Turkey. In the latter, cameras have gone into historic caves where "whole cities have been hollowed out," Wilson says.

While the Turkish government has been very eager and willing to work with the Bond company, Wilson says the Turks don't have much of a movie industry infrastructure, which necessitates his having to provide all the company's needs.

### Protecting potentates

Getting permits to film in Thailand proved to be a disappointing experience for production companies working on two Fox features, "Anna and the King" and "Broke-down Palace." John Phelan, unit production manager on "Anna," explains, "They have a law (that) prohibits anyone from writing or

publicly stating anything which depicts the king in a bad light."

In the case of the current remake starring Jodie Foster and Chow Yun-Fat, the production ultimately had to move to Malaysia. With the assistance of Malaysia's Multimedia Development Corp., Phelan says they had no problem getting permits, customs clearance and applications for tax exemptions for cast and crew.

The same fate beset "Broke-down Palace," a film about American girls serving time in a Thai prison for drug smuggling, when it tried to get permission to film there. Producer-writer Adam Field recalls, "I had written the script for specific locations in Bangkok, and I thought it would be a dream project."

When negotiations broke down, another location had to be found. "We created our own Thailand in the Philippines, with a little bit of second unit in Bangkok," Field says. That provided its own set of problems. "To re-create the scene-specific locations, the streets needed to be completely re-dressed, because traffic flows in a different direction in Thailand. Right-hand-drive cars had to be brought in and all the signage needed to be changed due to language difference."

### Art imitating life

While filming on location in the small town in Poland, the setting for Robin Williams starrer "Jakob the Liar," art began to imitate life in a strangely disturbing manner. After extensively scouting sites all over Eastern Europe, producer Mar-

cia Garces Williams chose the town of Piotrkow for the setting of the film's 1940s Polish ghetto. "Other than taking down antennas and satellite dishes, it had remained pretty much untouched by time," she says.

For one of the film's climactic moments, an execution scene was re-created in the town square. According to a local rabbi, it happened to be the very site where 22,000 Jews had been rounded up, 55 years ago to the month.

"It brought up a lot of emotions on the set; it was very emotional, very painful," says Williams. "None of us knew the history that had taken place there. There were a few people who were literally breaking down while we filmed."

### No escape

Southeastern Alaska provided the exotic setting for "Limbo," director John Sayles' film about a town called Port Henry where people go to reinvent themselves. Says producer Maggie Renzi, "We wanted to find a wilderness setting where people could be lost with the prospect of never being found." In Juneau, there are only two ways to arrive: by boat or by air. "But there are 35 miles of road which end in a place where, if you do it right, looks like wilderness."

"In choosing this location, what John and I had come to hope for was that our enterprise — this giant circus coming to town — would be a good fit for the town, and I would say that in Juneau, we never had a better match."

## Castel the place to go

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the region have drawn the occasional film production.

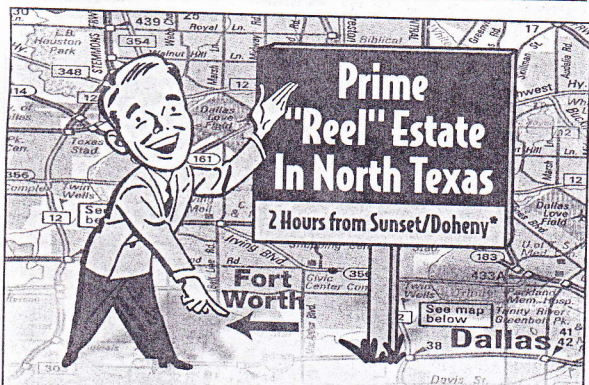
In general, however, Koliba has exercised complete control over the government's \$2 million film subsidy, putting it — unsurprisingly — into its own productions.

New management at Koliba is the first positive sign for Slovak film. Heading the list of potential buyers is Rudolf Biermann. His company, Charlie's, currently is preparing local helmer Martin Sulik's next film, the \$1 million "Land-scape," for fall '99. Charlie's also is supplying services for Agnieszka Holland's "The Third Miracle" during its three-day shoot in Slovakia in March.

Peter Dubecky, now heading up the Slovak Film Institute, hopes to see an increase in funding. "We're asking for funds for four films per year," he says.

Pubcaster Slovak TV is also jumping on board under its new management. Martin Smatlak, head of strategy and development, said the station is thinking of expanding its production services to handle 35mm film. There also is a drive to establish an independent film fund. "The good thing is that (the situation) is open now and there are discussions," Smatlak says.

Privatization of film studios has yet to come to Yugoslavia. Despite war and sanctions, film production has continued at a surprisingly steady pace. In 1998, eight films were completed, all of them domestic productions or co-prods. Although only one film was shot at Avala Film Studio last year, it has been active as a co-producer for such films as "Powder Keg" and "Black Cat, White Cat." Avala will continue in this role, co-producing "Karemsla," a thriller by director Alexander Bercek. The \$1.5 million film begins shooting this month at Avala.



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