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SCOUT'S HONOUR

From palm-shaded beach to stately home, the lot of the location scout is a pretty happy one. Or so you'd think. Behind the scenes, Neil Armstrong finds dark alleys and red tape

On the face of it, film location scout would appear to be one of the more agreeable careers. It certainly seems to have the edge over, say, crime scene cleaner or Virgin Trains customer relations officer. The director outlines the sort of place he has in mind for the locations alluded to in the script and the scout hotfoots it off to find them. It's essentially salaried travel. What's not to like?

Happily for those of us who aren't scouts, it's not all five-star hotels and beaches. For every Bond film shot in exotic destinations, there's a Mike Leigh movie that's not. For every Talented Mr Ripley, there's a Get Carter.

"You can't pick the locations you scout, you go with the script," says Lori Balton, who has worked recently on Seabiscuit and Catch Me If You Can. "One day, it's a high-end mansion, the next, an alley in downtown Los Angeles, stepping over used condoms, needles and dead rats."

And, better still, directors are notoriously awkward buggers. Simon Temple, one of the scouts on the Lord Of The Rings trilogy, says: "You might spend days and days finding a location that you think meets the requirements and the director might just not like the look of it and tell you to find another one. There's always something that isn't quite right."

Balton agrees. "Michael Mann, for example, is notoriously exacting. Working for him on Heat is the reason I know almost every corner of Los Angeles. You could search for weeks and finally he would concede, 'This is good - now find me something better'."

But the real problems don't begin until a site that meets with the director's approval has finally been settled upon. Then the location scout becomes the location manager. The location manager secures permission to film from all the relevant parties - police, councils, landowners, businesses. He sorts out access, parking and sometimes accommodation for the cast and crew. He must combine a genius for organisation with saintly diplomacy, devilish powers of persuasion and rat-like cunning. He has to be able to pacify the man from the National Trust when a brutish technician grinds chewing gum into the antique parquet floor. He has to be able to sell local residents the idea that having a 150-strong film crew camped out in their front gardens over the next seven days for a spot of night filming will be a delightful experience. He has to convince landowners that a couple of bottles of plonk are adequate payment for allowing their estate to be used by a production that will make hundreds of millions of pounds.

"A lot of people think it's just a case of finding a beach with a palm tree on it," says Terry Blyther, veteran of many movies including Gladiator and The Mummy. "It's no problem locating the beach but then you've got to find out who owns it. Somebody different might own the palm tree. You have to bring your equipment in on ships so you end up working with the navy. Where are you going to source your food from? All of a sudden the director wants to blow up bits of the beach, then you're dealing with environmentalists about the rare turtles that live there. It would be lovely to just turn up and film but it's not like that." "And if the weather fucks up, everyone tends to look at you as if that's your fault," adds Temple.

Urban locations come with their own problems. The 33-foot Winnebago trailer that most stars regard as standard can be difficult to park in certain areas of London. And traffic is another issue. Veteran location managers

become dewy-eyed over the memory of days when a donation to a policeman's favourite charity, given to the rozzar himself for safekeeping, could ensure that London was sealed off for hours. No longer.

"The capital is a very difficult place to film," says Nick Daubeny, location manager on a list of pictures as long as your arm. Harry Potter, scourge of the Dark Lord, Voldemort, very nearly came a cropper at the hands of a traffic cop from south London. "We wanted to use Lambeth Bridge for part of the knight bus sequence in Harry Potter And The Prisoner Of Azkaban," says Daubeny. "We had a meeting with Westminster police, Lambeth police and Transport For London and everything was going well until some policeman from Merton turned up and said it was illegal to close the bridge. The meeting ended in disarray and it took a lot of work before we were granted permission to shut it for four minutes while we shot the sequence."

David Broder, currently working on the big-screen version of Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy, says: "On Enigma, it took six months of negotiation to close Trafalgar Square and turn it into a 1940s set. Six months of planning for a few hours shooting one bank holiday Monday morning." Which translated into 15 seconds of footage at the start of the movie and 90 at the end.

But no amount of planning can account for eventualities like being linked with the antichrist. "While I was working on Interview With The Vampire, the Church of England saw an interview with Anne Rice and decided that the film was blasphemous and anti-Christian," Daubeny says.

"Churches were told not to help us in any way. I managed to find one called St Paul's in Deptford where the vicar didn't know we were persona non grata. We filmed there but it was very nerve-racking because we never knew if he was going to get a call telling him to kick us out."

"I worked on High Crimes starring Morgan Freeman," says Hollywood-based Scott Trimble. "There's a scene near the start where Ashley Judd and Jim Caviezel are walking through San Francisco's Union Square. There are a lot of ritzy stores there and it took three months of negotiations to ensure that we had access to their balconies for our cameras, that their lights were going to be left on, and so on.

"On the night we were finally due to shoot, Ashley Judd was sick and couldn't work. We had to cancel everything, pack up and start renegotiating."

Film folk like to bellyache about their work - the long hours, the boredom, the sheer hard physical labour - but they're not fooling anyone. We all know location management is a damn sight more fulfilling than our hamster-wheel jobs. "A few weeks ago I was kayaking up a Russian river, looking for a place for the kimono maker's studio for Memoirs Of A Geisha," says Lori Balton. "That was heaven."

"My most satisfying work was for Onegin where we had to shoot Russia in the UK," reveals Daubeny. "I found some silver birch woods off the A3 and a house called Northington Grange in Hampshire. When the Russian producer came over he said they had as much essence of Russia as anything you could find in Russia itself."

Blyther says: "A highlight of my career was finding a location which had never been filmed before - Bourne Woods in Surrey, used for the opening battle in Gladiator. Best bit of the film I reckon."

Location, Location, Location

Tony Reeves, author of The Worldwide Guide To Movie Locations (Titan Books), compiled this list of the most overused locations in the UK. The same ones crop up again and again and again. Here's a selection.

King's Cross Gasometeres, London

"The gasometers actually disappeared recently but just behind King's Cross Station there was a wonderful area of cobbled streets and 19th century industrial buildings," says Reeves. Used in: Backbeat, Chaplin, High Hopes, The Ladykillers, The Missionary, Nuns On The Run, Richard III, Shirley Valentine, Velvet Goldmine.

Knebworth House, Hertfordshire

"Famous for the monster rock concerts in its grounds, the mansion at Knebworth has often been relied on for a brooding gothic atmosphere." Used in: Batman, Haunted Honeymoon, Lair Of The White Worm, The Wings Of The Dove, Sir Henry At Rawlinson End, The Shooting Party.

Luton Hoo, Bedfordshire

"This stately home has been a favourite location for years. It used to be open to the public but is now a private hotel." Used in: Eyes Wide Shut, Four Weddings And A Funeral, Never Say Never Again, A Shot In The Dark, Wilde.

Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich, London

"A popular complex of buildings on the Thames, which has proved endlessly adaptable, representing everything from Washington's Pentagon to wartime London streets to a Venetian church." Used in: The Bounty, Charlotte Gray, King Ralph, The Mummy Returns, Patriot Games, Shanghai Knights, Shining Through. The chapel was used in The Four Feathers and Four Weddings And A Funeral. The Painted Hall was used in The Avengers, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, The Madness Of King George.

Somerset House, The Strand, London

"Before it was renovated as an elegant fountain court, the courtyard of Somerset House on the Strand was used as a frequent film location." Used in: Goldeneye, The Private Life Of Sherlock Holmes, Shanghai Knights, Sleepy Hollow, Tomorrow Never Dies, Wilde.