

On Location in Sri Lanka

Posted on

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Thai and African jungles, Burmese villages, Indian kingdoms, montane tea plantations, and the depths of the Great Barrier Reef-all these and many other exotic locations have come together in Sri Lanka, in the make-believe world of the cinema. Sri Lanka's advantages as a prime film location have been discovered by the best-known among film directors from the early fifties, and have made it one of the most sought after filming sites today.

While on location in the Kandyan hills for his movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom," none other than Hollywood's Steven Spielberg said, "This (Sri Lanka) is a film set made by God himself. This is a film-maker's dream." Making this film in the early eighties, he used Lankan locations around Kandy for scenes of the former Indian maharajahs' kingdoms in the Himalayan hills.

According to Spielberg, in Sri Lanka there is a change of scenery almost every fifty miles, while in most other parts of the world such, a change is available only after travelling several hundreds of miles. Like many other film-makers, Spielberg had another reason for being attracted to Sri Lanka: the traditional hospitality and the excellent holiday prospects. "The crew and the cast like to come to work in Sri Lanka because they can make their stay here a holiday in itself. That is why I noticed my crew and cast coming with their entire families," he said.

Sri Lanka's reputation as a versatile and desirable film location has been growing over several decades. In the early fifties the celebrated David Lean made the "Outcast of the Island", starring Trevor Howard, in which locations here were chosen to depict a Burmese village. Then came "The Purple Plain" which featured Gregory Peck at the height of his fame, and "Elephant Walk" which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Peter Finch.

While these were happy beginnings, the country's real claim to "stardom" as a film site came with that David Lean production which made cinema history: "The Bridge

on the River Kwai". In 'The Bridge' Sri Lanka was chosen to stand in for Thailand, where there was unrest at the time. It was made almost entirely on location at Kitulgala, off the Colombo Ratnapura Road, using a large number of local extras and supporting technical crew. The Oscar-winning hit, which starred Alec Guinness in one of his bestremembered roles, depicted the true story of hundreds of Allied prisoners-of-war perished in building a rail bridge for the Japanese. The producers found little difficulty in constructing a whole bridge across the river at Kitulgala and later blazing it, together with several rail bogeys, for the final scenes of the movie. The Kitulgala Resthouse which was the centre of operations for the film, still displays several sepia photographs of the great experience which brought the place to international fame.

Soon the combination of welcome climate, abundant verdant valleys and hills, friendly people with a large number speaking English, the ever present warmth of hospitality, comfortable hotels and the availability of good technical support through the growing Sri Lankan film industry made this country known to filmmakers the world over.

In the sixties, a reputed German producer located his entire film "Three Yellow Cats" in our island. The film no doubt had a beneficial effect for Sri Lanka, since many Germans were exposed to the beauty of the country as the story took an adventurous scientist through some of Sri Lanka's most exotic places. Many believe that the German "tourist invasion of Sri Lanka" might have been prompted in some measure by this film.

A film in a different vein was "Tarzan the Ape Man" made in the seventies, which starred Bo Derek and was directed by her husband, John. It was made on location over an extensive area, which included the Kandyan hills, the hinterland of the Mahaweli River and its tributaries and in eastern Trincomalee. There is even today a "Tarzan Hotel", a small rural kiosk, beside the Mahaweli tributary where most of the shooting took place.

The Dereks came back to make another spectacular film called "Ghosts Can't Do It", which was shot in Galle beside the historic Dutch fortress there, its harbour, and its old buildings such as the New Oriental and Cloisenberg Hotels. Some scenes were shot in the beach resort of Bentota before moving on to Negombo, north of Colombo. The production company decided to bring in a minimum of technicians and crew because as Bo Derek herself, with her husband agreeing, said: "Sri Lankan movie men are good enough and even equal to those we have in Hollywood. So just

as well, we employ your men and women’.’

Another film, expected to be a hit in the U.S. after its record-breaking run in Germany, is the West German-Sri Lankan production “Cobra Heat”, made entirely on Sri Lankan locations. The story involves a network of international drug traffickers with their headquarters in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Police joining forces with international police to hunt down the drug dealers. Sri Lanka’s leading film star, Ravindra Randeniya, headed the local cast and shared the top credits with such big names as Elke Sommers, Tony Kendall and Heather Thomas. Frontline roles for Lankan actors have become a pattern in many productions that come on location here, as in the Australian tele-film about Charles Sobhraj, made for Television of Asia’s “Most Celebrated Criminals”. This production features Ravindra Randeniya together with several other local stars such as Henry Jayasena Asoka Perera, Lucky Wickrernanayake and J. H. Jayewardene in key roles.

In fact, the current boast in Sri Lanka among those who offer facilities to Western film-makers who locate their films here is that they can not only simulate most countries of the world here, but they can also provide men and women who can stand in for any race in the world. It was not surprising, therefore, that when Eurobrothers Productions of the United States brought their film “Iron Triangle” to Sri Lanka they not only found “authentic Vietnam scenes” for the whole film, but also found “Vietnamese” extras as well•as both white and black “American GIs”.

In late 1988, one of the most interesting films to be shot in Sri Lanka was “Spooks”, which brought together spies from the CIA in the U.S. to the KGB in the Soviet Union to meet on a fictitious island and plot the fall of Wall Street. The film was made completely in Kandy and in the busy streets of Colombo.

The last days of the tottering Marcos’ regime in the Philippines were enacted in the old colonial buildings, streets and by-roads of Colombo and at the International Airport at Katunayake for the TV series “Dangerous Life”. And in the TV series “Shadow of the Cobra”, an Australian director presented to the world Asia’s “killer of finesse”, Charles Sobhraj (played by Art Malik), who is believed to have been responsible for at least 15 murders and a spate of slick robberies during the seventies. The film was shot entirely in Sri Lanka, and New Delhi’s high-security jail, the New Delhi courts and that city’s old colonial hotels and busy streets where Sobhraj stayed and carried out his nefarious activities were all replicated on location in and around Colombo. The French, not wanting to miss out on using Sri Lankan locations, came here with a Kerala-based story of a little Catholic girl who claimed

reincarnation from a previous life. Francois Villiers, one of France's leading directors, filmed on location in Negombo, Paiyagala and parts of Colombo. Director Villiers said of the local film stars: "We brought a language coach to prompt them in their English language dialogue. The stars did their dialogue so well that the coach had no work at all!"

Film crew, technicians and even experts such as art directors, production managers and assistant directors, as well as hosts of extras, are available at rates comparably much cheaper than in most other countries.

Some locally based businesses have been formed to service foreign film-makers on location in Sri Lanka. These organizations maintain comprehensive lists of film actors, technicians and crew members and provide expertise and location props as well. They will arrange location inspections and, when locations are selected, handle the red tape of government procedures. Additionally, dealing with import and export procedures, making accommodation arrangements, giving advice on local values, culture, religion and other aspects of this country, etc., are all part of the services they provide to their clients.

Sri Lanka has become a major filming site and both the Ceylon Tourist Board and Airlanka, the national carrier, are now geared to service foreign film-makers who come here on location.



Sri Lanka stands in for Vietnam as the setting for the war movie "The Iron Triangle."