

# THE ROAD TO **HOLLYWOOD**

Welcome to the world's biggest movie set. California's epic terrain has featured in countless films – hit the road to find the scene-stealing landscapes that have helped Hollywood take on the world

WORDS BY  
**CHRISTA LARWOOD**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
**MARK READ**



The open plains of Death Valley stretching to the horizon

San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, a veteran star of the silver screen. **BELOW LEFT** Film expert Susan Hosking-Ramos, under Jedi master Yoda's watchful eye



**S**WATHES of dense sea-fog wrap around the Golden Gate Bridge, concealing and revealing the city of San Francisco like a colossal Dance of the Seven Veils. In the distance, the hunched, brooding form of Alcatraz Island slowly emerges, then the jagged skyline of Downtown and, gradually, the pale cylinder of Coit Tower and Pier 39, with its busy docks and colourful boardwalk. The city has appeared like a mirage, its hills all bathed in a soft, golden light. Minutes later, it is gone again.

When Alfred Hitchcock arrived in San Francisco in 1951, he declared that it was the perfect place for a murder mystery and, captivated by its moody, capricious weather and striking setting, he shot his classic *Vertigo* here. He wasn't alone in seeing the city's silver screen potential. This place has been captured from every angle by filmmakers from Golden Age impresario Cecil B DeMille to Francis Ford Coppola.

A morning wander reveals the impossibly steep streets where Steve McQueen's green '68 Mustang streamed through the air in *Bullitt's* spectacular car chase, and the sky-scraping Financial District where *The Towering Inferno* blazed. At the docks, where dozens of sea lions clamber to doze in soft brown piles, the lonely island known locally as The Rock can be seen, from which Clint Eastwood made his *Escape from Alcatraz*. Stretching north is the

Golden Gate Bridge itself, saved from disaster by the heroics of Superman, James Bond and the X-Men, to name just a few.

'More than a thousand movies have been filmed in this town. And San Francisco is so distinctive, with its landscape and architecture – not to mention that big, beautiful bridge – that the city itself becomes a central character,' says Susan Hosking-Ramos. She holds up one hand to protect her eyes from the sun as she strolls through the grounds of Lucasfilm, the digital effects headquarters of *Star Wars* creator George Lucas – who is himself a local lad made good.

Susan is currently working to establish San Francisco's first film museum, and she often comes here for inspiration. Others come to pay homage, posing with imaginary light sabres next to a fountain crowned with a bronze statue of Yoda, *Star Wars'* diminutive, green-skinned Jedi master.

Susan talks of the early 20th century, when San Francisco was the leading light of California's movie industry, and the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Rudolph Valentino came here to make it big. 'Then, between 1910 and 1920, a lot of the industry moved down to LA. We were robbed!' she says with a wry grin. 'But San Francisco has remained important. Directors like Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas come here to make movies that are outside the Hollywood studio system. They get called Fog ►



MAP ILLUSTRATION: STUART KOLAKOVIC



The dramatic, rocky coast of Big Sur. BELOW FROM LEFT Location scout Sean O'Brien knows every corner of California; hitting the open road

'What makes California the premier place to shoot is the variety of landscapes. Whether

City Mavericks because they don't want to be told what to do. They want the freedom of expression that drew them to making films in the first place. And in that way, they are representative of the values of San Francisco.'

She makes a gesture with her hand that seems to take in the whole city, with its history of beatnik poets, free love and gay rights, now clear and present under a perfect blue sky. 'This is a place where you come to be yourself.'

**C**ALIFORNIA is the undisputed movie-making centre of the world. Although India may produce more films and China has bigger studios, the industry based in this sprawling US state has an unmatched influence that reaches across the globe. Even the name 'Hollywood' has become so synonymous with films and film-making, it's spurred copycat nicknames from Bollywood in Mumbai – which was once known as Bombay – and Nollywood in Nigeria to Wellywood in Wellington, New Zealand, and Lollywood, in the Pakistani city of Lahore.

So why did it all happen here? California wasn't a leading contender around the turn of the 20th century – that honour belonged to Chicago and New York, where America's first commercial films were made. Yet the west coast's sunny weather was a big draw at a time when even indoor scenes were filmed in the open air to save on lighting costs. It was also blessedly far from the reach of east-coast patent holders such as Thomas Edison, who would defend his camera technology with legal challenges and, if the mood took him, with hired goons wielding baseball bats.

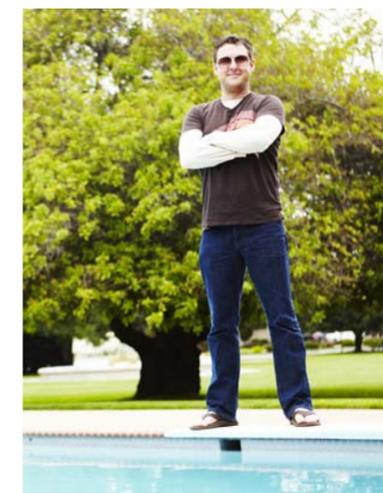
The other reason for California's movie supremacy becomes clear on the journey south from San Francisco. The modern freeways and suburban sprawl give way to high grasslands in the Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve and dense redwood forests north of Santa Cruz. The Pacific Coast Highway stretches out ahead, tracing rocky headlands and gentle sandy bays. At Big Sur, it climbs up the rough volcanic ranges, carving around cliffs with sheer drops to the thrashing ocean below, and leads on to the silver-grey foreshores of San Simeon, where elephant seals parp and loll, wriggling to inch themselves up the sand as the frothing tide approaches.

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'What makes California the premier place to shoot is the variety of landscapes,' says location scout Sean O'Brien. He lives in Los Angeles, but travels across the country and the world seeking the perfect settings for films, television and advertisements. Settled comfortably in the leather-look booth of a roadside diner, he orders a cup of coffee and explains the secrets of his craft.

'You can be shooting a scene at the beach here in the morning, in the mountains doing a snow shot that same afternoon, then you can head down to the desert, all in one day. It's that fast. Salt flats, sand dunes, cities, suburban zones, industrial areas, farms – whatever you need. Nowhere else has diverse topography like this.'

In the early days, when filming abroad was often too expensive to contemplate, movie studios in California were able to tell stories set around the world using landscapes found conveniently on their doorsteps. In 1929, Paramount Pictures produced a map promoting these natural features as 'the world in one state', and some of the biggest films in history feature California as a scenic stand-in. *The Ten Commandments* saw a grey-bearded and bewigged Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea of Egypt to the ►





FROM LEFT Bright California poppies cover the hills at Tejon Ranch; Bruce Ryan heads out before dawn to muster cattle (MAIN IMAGE)

south of Big Sur, near Santa Barbara. Shirley Temple's *Heidi* skipped over the 'Swiss Alps' in the San Bernadino Forest to the west of Lost Angeles, and the trenches of northern France were recreated in Orange County for *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Even US locations did not escape substitution: the production of *Gone With The Wind* didn't set foot in Georgia, where Scarlett O'Hara's beloved Tara was supposedly located.

'It still happens today, most definitely,' Sean says, running a finger across Paramount's 1929 map. 'If you can't film internationally, I think you can cheat anywhere in California: Afghanistan, the South of France, Tuscany. Even the snowy Siberian tundra, out on the salt flats. It's all white!' He laughs, flashing a grin. 'This is Hollywood – you can make it happen.'

**A**T dawn the next day, around 150 miles inland, Bruce Ryan pulls on his black Stetson hat and heads out into a dew-soaked morning. Around him, soft green hills stretch to the horizon, descending into cool glades crowded with broad-trunked, 400-year-old oak trees. With skills practised over the course of almost four decades here, he manoeuvres his horse to round up a group of recalcitrant, russet-coloured calves, heading off their meanderings with an authoritative click of his tongue. Above him, the moon persists in the sky despite the growing sunlight, making a silhouette of a golden eagle as it bobs up and down, riding warm currents in the air.

Bruce's round-up takes place in a tiny corner of Tejon Ranch, a huge conserved property of around 240,000 acres stretching from the fertile farmlands of the San Joaquin Valley over the ridge of the Sierra Nevada to the edge of the Mojave Desert. It's an area of rare biodiversity that has scientists swarming, with a number of endangered species and landscapes ranging from this rolling oak savannah to alpine forests, cactus groves and desert grasslands.

This geographical crossroads is a perfect microcosm of California's natural landscapes, so it's perhaps not surprising that Hollywood is a regular visitor here. One part of the ranch has been specifically designed for directors looking to 'cheat' Africa, with a huge single oak tree clipped into the shape of an acacia. It's not always an effective ruse: today, the wildflowers are out in force, with spills of purple lupine and bright orange California poppies spreading across the plains, rather ruining the illusion. In the summer, however, the tree's careful topiary against a backdrop of bleached grass gives an unmistakable African look – especially when elephants and zebras are brought in, as happened when scenes from the latest *Transformers* movie were shot here in 2010. ▶



'It's an area of rare biodiversity, with

rolling oak savannah, alpine conifer forests, cactus groves and desert grasslands'

From this traditional ranching land, the road follows the Sierra Nevada Mountains northeast through the baking Mojave Desert to a place where no ranching actually takes place, yet the most famous cowboys of them all have come here to strut their stuff.

The Lone Ranger, John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Clint Eastwood have all slung guns, rescued little ladies and ridden off into the sunset in the Alabama Hills. These odd, weather-rounded granite formations, huddled between the tiny town of Lone Pine and the snow-dusted peak of Mount Whitney, have played host to more than 400 films and television shows – mostly Westerns. So ubiquitous was this setting for cowboy movies in the '40s and '50s, that this tiny area has become the definitive Wild West landscape, representing New Mexico, Arizona and the untamed reaches of California itself.

Today, several fans of *Rawhide* – the 1960s Western television series – have arrived from out of town and are gingerly picking their way on horseback among the rust-coloured rocks. One of the group, a man with a silver ponytail trailing down his back, points

out the sites of famous scenes from the programme in hushed tones of profound reverence.

According to Kerry Powell, a local resident and founder of the annual Lone Pine Film Festival, fans who come here usually make a bit more noise, playing action-packed games of cowboys and Indians – sometimes in full costume and face paint.

At 74, Kerry negotiates the boulders a little gingerly, but she knows her way around these rocks. As a kid, she would sneak up to where the movies were being filmed and watch the biggest stars of the day, like Humphrey Bogart and Cary Grant, riding the grassy plains and waging battle in exciting canyon shoot-outs.

Despite the instantly familiar Western terrain, Hollywood has also used these hills as a stand-in for places such as Mexico and Afghanistan and the odd, barren landscapes of alien planets. 'My favourite was when they filmed the Indian classic *Gunga Din* here,' Kerry remarks. 'We were so thrilled as kids to see those elephants running all over our hills.' ▶



ABOVE FROM LEFT Harold Greenberg props up the bar; Wild West décor at Jake's Saloon; Kerry Powell heads for the hills; the bright lights of Lone Pine

'Local kids would watch the biggest stars of the day, like Humphrey Bogart and Cary

Grant, riding the grassy plains and waging battle in exciting canyon shoot-outs'



Crowded with curious-looking, rounded boulders, the Alabama Hills provide the archetypal Wild West setting

## CALIFORNIA

The famous sign on Mount Lee is a global symbol of the Los Angeles movie industry



'A constant stream of visitors tramp up and make pouting, starlet poses for the camera'

Though directors still like to shoot on this classic terrain – Quentin Tarantino was in town last month – the filming frenzy here died down as the popularity of Westerns waned through the 1960s. Locals of a certain age, however, all have a story of when their little town became an outpost of Hollywood – and the rocks have continued to hold their appeal. According to 62-year-old Lovella from the Lone Pine Rock and Gift Shop, the area was just as popular as the kids grew older, when they would hide among the rocks at night and party. 'You could see the cop cars coming from a long way away,' she says with a solemn wink.

**O**n a flat-topped hill overlooking the sprawling city of Los Angeles, around 120 miles south of the Alabama Hills, the grass has been worn bare by thousands of eager feet. A constant stream of visitors tramp up to this point and make pouting, starlet poses for the camera, lining themselves up with a set of rather plain and higgledy letters that rise behind them on the slopes of Mount Lee – the world-famous Hollywood Sign. These 14m-high letters were originally erected as 'Hollywoodland', an advertisement for a housing development, with no connection to the movie business at all. However, partly due to the restoration efforts of, oddly enough, Playboy founder Hugh Hefner – the sign has come to be a central part of this town's showbiz mythology.

The mere names of the streets are enough to conjure glamorous celluloid images: Rodeo Drive, Sunset Boulevard, Mulholland Drive. Then there are the slick restaurants jammed with lunching execs in designer shades, sprawling studios with serious-looking security guards, and gangs of paparazzi lying in wait outside hotels and boutiques. On Hollywood Boulevard, visitors kneel down to squash their hands into the cement imprints left by stars of Hollywood's Golden Age – and the cast of the *Harry Potter* movies

– while the floor of the nearby shopping hub, the Hollywood & Highland Center, is paved with starry-eyed success stories. The message is clear: you too can be a star. Once they've read the inspirational quotes, tired shoppers can rest on a conveniently provided casting director's couch. 'LA is so saturated with people who are engaged in filmmaking and television, it's hard to go about your normal life here without getting bopped across the head with it,' says Kestrin Pantera, settling into a poolside chair at the plush Roosevelt Hotel. Like many hopefuls who come here to follow their destiny, Kestrin arrived in LA eight years ago to pursue her acting career. She has already achieved some success, having appearing in several independent films and commercials.

'I don't think I would have chosen to move to LA if I hadn't wanted to pursue a career in the entertainment industry,' she says. 'But people are constantly asking you: "Why don't you move to LA?" It's like it's ingrained in our cultural DNA.'

She pauses, then laughs and admits: 'I'm originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, so I have a natural aversion to Los Angeles. It's just that there are few other places where you can be walking along the street, be spotted by an agent or manager, and then suddenly you've made it. You don't know when it's going to happen, you don't know what you need to do, it just somehow chooses you. It's confusing and mythic, but it happens here. That's Hollywood.' **LP**

**Christa Larwood** is *Lonely Planet Magazine's* contributing editor, and was rather delighted to make her first appearance on our cover driving a Mustang. **See our August issue for more on film locations of the world.**

**TWO** For a behind-the-scenes look at the joys and pitfalls of Hollywood success, watch *Episodes*, a comedy series starring Tamsin Greig, Stephen Mangan and Matt LeBlanc, now showing on BBC Two and iPlayer.



Up-and-coming actress Kestrin Pantera on the rooftop of the Roosevelt Hotel