

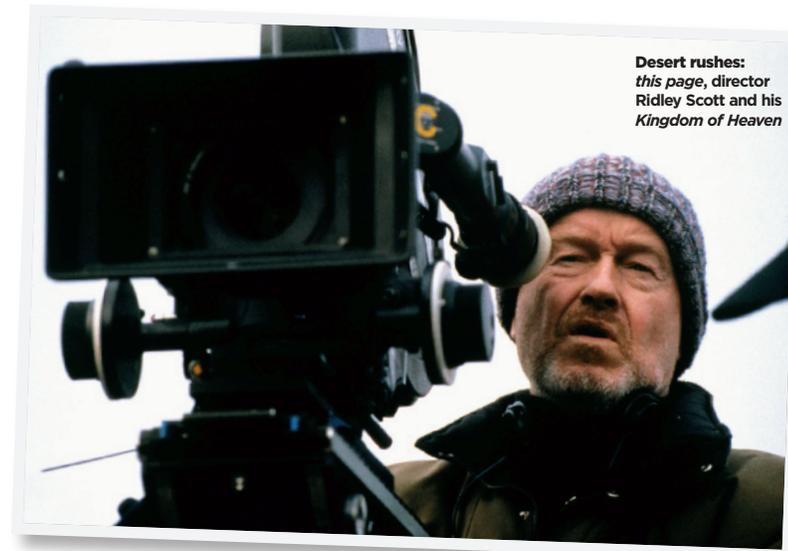


MAKING A SCENE

Now, more than ever, Morocco's versatile, sweeping landscape is drawing top-name directors, such as Ridley Scott, Martin Scorsese and Paul Greengrass, as well as fostering home-grown talent

EVER SINCE LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, MOROCCO HAS BEEN A HOT SPOT FOR FILMMAKERS looking to take ancient history for a spin in top-flight historical dramas (*Troy*, *Gladiator*), or just bring a touch of scorched glamour to their productions with its breathtaking landscapes and ancient walled cities and kasbahs. With the world's current geopolitical situation thrusting films with Middle Eastern-tinged storylines into the spotlight, Morocco finds itself as the North African nation of choice for Hollywood and international productions, thanks to its safety, stability and cost-effectiveness (the budget for a nine-week shoot in Casablanca would only stretch to 10 days in New York City). In recent years, the chameleon-like nation has represented Afghanistan in *Charlie Wilson's War*, Tibet in Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* and Iraq in Paul Haggis' *In The Valley of Elah*, in which ramshackle neighbourhoods of Marrakech stood in for war-torn Baghdad.

But Morocco doesn't only masquerade as other countries: in *Babel*, Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett are right in its secluded heart for a storyline that paints a bleak picture of being an injured Westerner in an uncaring society. Not every country would have looked kindly on such controversial subject matter being filmed there, but King Mohammed VI is known to be an avid film buff and, since he ascended the throne in 1999, has set out to make his country a hothouse for foreign and local filmmakers alike. Nothing is considered too much of a hot



Desert rushes:
this page, director
Ridley Scott and his
Kingdom of Heaven

When Ridley Scott shot *Kingdom of Heaven*, Morocco's King loaned 1,000 troops for the battle scenes



potato: "Everything is permitted here, at very good prices," jokes Ismail Farih, spokesperson for the recently opened CLA Studios near Ouarzazate, "except for XXX movies."

The local executives responsible for Morocco's filming permissions lure overseas productions through a combination of generous tax exemptions, free rein to shut down city streets during shoots, the creation of a film studio in Ouarzazate and even the ready availability of equipment and soldiers from the Royal Moroccan Army. When Ridley Scott shot his Crusades epic *Kingdom of Heaven* in the country, the King personally loaned the production 1,000 troops to use in the film's spectacular battle scenes, with no time limit imposed for their return.

"Initially they thought it was very amusing, they thought it was going to be great fun," laughs Scott of his real-life military extras, "but eventually they realised how boring and repetitive filmmaking can be." When inflammatory reports surfaced during the shoot that Scott's Crusaders tale would rile Muslim sensibilities, the King also insisted that Scott accept four personal bodyguards to stay by his side 24-7. "It was very generous and I thanked him," says the British director, "but I didn't need it. I never had any trouble; everybody was very friendly the whole time we were in Morocco."

Director Paul Greengrass "practically closed Tangier down for weeks" to shoot an action sequence for *The Bourne Ultimatum*, which sent Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) tearing through the port city's labyrinthine streets on a

motorcycle and over its rooftops on foot. “Tangier was a wonderful place to shoot,” says Greengrass, who had the added challenge of shooting during Ramadan, which meant shutting down production when fasting crowds got cranky. “It’s a wonderful location that harks back to the 70s but also has a strong contemporary resonance. We had a lot of fun there.”

A dynamic new wave of filmmakers are testing out the country’s relaxed censorship laws

As did Bourne star Matt Damon, although he did come to regret one character choice: “Bourne doesn’t wear sunglasses,” the actor sighs, which left him squinting in the blazing Moroccan sunshine for weeks.

With film shoots pumping upwards of \$100 million a year into the economy, it makes sense to keep movie makers coming. But the regime is also determined to advance its own filmmakers, recently unveiling its first national visual arts school in Marrakech in the presence of Martin Scorsese. There are still relatively few films being made in Morocco. At the most recent edition of the Marrakech Film Festival, whose president is the King’s younger brother Prince Moulay Mouldid, only one Moroccan film was featured in competition: Latif Lahlou’s *Les Jardins de Samira*, about an urbane young woman forced into an arranged marriage with an aged, violent farmer.

Lahlou has been making films since the 60s, but he and a dynamic new wave of filmmakers—including Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, Faouzi Bensäidi, Nabil Ayouch, Laila Marrakchi and Narjiss Nejjar—are testing out their country’s relaxed censorship laws to tackle subjects that would have been unthinkable even 10 years ago: religion, sex, crime and poverty. Ayouch’s cross-cultural comedy *Whatever Lola Wants* played at the Dubai



LOCATION SCOUT

TRACK DOWN MOROCCO’S MOVIE MAGIC

Ait Ben Haddou

This spectacular desert town (above) lies about 15 miles northwest of Ouarzazate on the Marrakech road and has played host to *The Jewel of the Nile*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Gladiator*. In the latter, it’s the hillside town where Russell Crowe is sold into slavery, with a small gladiator’s arena built next to the existing village for the shoot.

La Kasbah de Toubkal

Scorsese was banned by the Chinese government from entering Tibet so returned to the country where he first came for *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This mountain retreat, near Imlil, is situated at the foot of Jbel Toubkal, north Africa’s highest peak, and doubled for a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Martin Scorsese’s Dalai Lama epic *Kundun*.

Meknes

In a 50-year building splurge, Sultan Moulay Ismael turned this dusty desert town into a spectacular walled capital city housing over 50 palaces. Scorsese opted to use it for ancient

Jerusalem in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, including the interior of the Temple and Pontius Pilate’s opulent residence. It’s located about 130km north of Rabat, which has taken on the mantle of Morocco’s capital city.

Atlas Mountains

John Huston’s adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King*, which stars Sean Connery and Michael Caine, takes place in the breathtaking mountain ranges of India and Afghanistan but was shot entirely in Morocco’s Atlas Mountains.

Kingdom of Heaven Fortress

On the road between Marrakech and Ouarzazate lies the CLA Studios complex, where Ridley Scott had the largest freestanding set ever constructed for his Crusades epic *Kingdom of Heaven*. An entire fortress built in the desert, it primarily served as Jerusalem during its siege by Saracen forces. CLA purchased it to use for other projects so the impressive structure is still standing.



View to a thrill: here, director Paul Greengrass and Matt Damon with the city of Rabat as a backdrop; below, Leonardo di Caprio in the upcoming *House of Lies*

Film Festival, a prestigious platform for a Moroccan director, while Marrakchi's debut feature, *Marock*, was a local box-office smash but did stir up a hornet's nest for its depiction of a Muslim-Jewish romance. "Even though this happens in real life, it's more difficult to show it in films," says Marrakchi. "Some people didn't accept it, but I wanted to show the reality of this country. These stories are real, they exist and they are a part of this country."

After producing barely 100 films in 30 years, the production rate exploded in 1998 to a dozen a year, with the country aiming to host 40 films per annum by 2020. It's ambitious but could be essential if the current momentum is to carry on, especially as Morocco's position as locations king may be under threat, with more high-profile movies opting to shoot in Jordan (including Brian De Palma's *Redacted* and Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha*) and the Gulf emirates flinging pots of cash to attract producers. But political sensitivities still rule elsewhere, and when Dubai decided to reject Ridley Scott's politically charged *House of Lies*, Morocco's film executives were able to land the high-profile shoot.

Starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Russell

After producing barely 100 films in 30 years, now Morocco aims to host 40 a year by 2020



Crowe, Scott's big-budget thriller about a CIA agent sent to Jordan to track down an al-Qaida leader recently filmed in the capital city of Rabat as well as CLA Studios. Like Scorsese, who made *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun* there, Scott's something of a Morocco veteran, having previously used its dazzling scenery as a substitute for the Roman Empire (*Gladiator*), Somalia (*Black Hawk Down*) and Crusades-era Holy Lands (*Kingdom of Heaven*). *Bourne*-director Greengrass is another filmmaker who adores the kingdom: he's currently there with Matt Damon shooting an as yet untitled adaptation of Rajiv Chandrasekaran's novel *Imperial Life in The Emerald City*, about the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War.

"I absolutely love Morocco," says Scott. "It's clean, clear, and a great place to go. In spring and autumn, it's just beautiful."

