

# LOCATION 20/21

## INTERNATIONAL

SHOWCASING THE GLOBAL PRODUCTION INDUSTRY





# YOUR IDEAS IN ACTION

Greece has the longest coastline in the Mediterranean, upwards of 6,000 islands, 250 days a year of sunshine, soft winters and arguably the world's best archaeological sites, most of which are available for shoots. No wonder the country is a genuine filmmaker's paradise. **GARY SMITH** reports



Michael Winterbottom shooting *Greed* on Mykonos



**T**IS no surprise that Athens, with its globally famous archaeological sites, is a hugely popular filming location. The same is true of the islands of Corfu, Crete, Mykonos and Santorini, while lesser-known Nisyros — a small island in the Dodecanese, with a film-friendly volcano — is starting to be regularly requested for filming.

"All archaeological sites around the country are available for shoots," says Venia Vergou, director of the Hellenic Film Commission at the Greek Film Centre. "They are under the jurisdiction of the ministry of culture, but as long as the scenes requested are not offensive to the monuments and their authenticity, they are not off limits."

In terms of modern locations, Vergou points to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Athens, which includes the National Library of Greece, the Greek National Opera, and the 210,000 sq m (2,260,421 sq ft) Stavros Niarchos Park. "The Center was designed by architect Renzo Piano and is a state-of-the-art location," she says. "It is, however, more than just a new building — it has important symbolic connotations for Greece as it was built during the [financial] crisis and has become a landmark location in the everyday lives of Athenians. I believe it has a lot of potential in terms of hosting amazing productions."

Another new landmark is the National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens, which opened to the public at the end of February 2020. "It's the former Fix brewery on Syngrou Avenue," Vergou says, adding that the building occupies approximately 18,000 sq m of a 3,000-plus sq m area.

But shooting in Greece is about much more than getting great shots: "Greece offers a unique combination of stunning locations, qualified English-speaking crews, an amazing climate, film-friendly light, world-famous cuisine and our infamous, lively hospitality. In terms of production, the 35% cash-rebate programme is very competitive because of the extremely low minimum eligible Greek expenditure of €100,000 for feature films and documentaries, €60,000 for digital games and €30,000 per episode for TV series."

Michael Winterbottom shot his recent feature *Greed* (2019) — starring Steve Coogan — on the islands of Mykonos and Delos, among the most important mythological, historical and archaeological sites in Greece. Winterbottom came back to shoot *The Trip to Greece* (2020), the last in Sky One's acclimated *The Trip* TV series, which takes Homer's *Odyssey* and *Odysseus'* journey back home to Ithaca as its inspiration. The project shot at numerous archaeological sites, including the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, the Agora in Athens, the Great Theatre of Epidaurus, the island of Hydra, the Caves of Diros, the Palace of Nestor, the fortress of Niokastro and Ancient Stagira, as well as in restaurants and hotels in Athens, Hydra, Lesbos, Chalkidiki, Pelion, Kavala and the Peloponnese.

One of the biggest productions filmed in Greece in 2019 was the feature film *Born to Be Murdered*, directed by Ferdinando Cito Filomarino and starring John David Washington and Alicia Vikander. "It's a conspiracy thriller shot in central locations in Athens," Vergou says. "It included a demanding riot scene and an election speech to a large crowd, both of which were shot in Syntagma Square in front of the Greek Parliament. Further scenes were shot at the

highly photogenic sites of Meteora and Zagorochoria, a complex of picturesque traditional villages in Epirus."

Corfu, meanwhile, won the EUFCN (European Film Commissions Network) Best Location Award 2018 for TV drama *Agries Melisses* (2019). "It's a daily series that currently gets the highest ratings on Greek television," says Vasiliki Diagouma, head of communication and international relations at EKOME (National Centre of Audiovisual Media and Communications). "It's about three rural sisters living in a small fictional village in the Thessalian flatland in the late 1950s. The production crew built an entirely new set, representing a typical village on the Greek mainland in the 1950s in order to meet the story's needs."

Another popular TV drama to have filmed on Corfu is *The Durrells* (2016-19), directed by Roger Goldby and Steve Baron. The ITV series is based on the late naturalist Gerald Durrell's three



A shoot for *Agries Melisses*, Greece's most popular daily drama

autobiographical books about his family's four years on Corfu in the run-up to the Second World War.

"The locations in Corfu, including the main house where Gerald Durrell spent his childhood, had to be transformed into a 1930s look for the 26 episodes that were shot between 2016 and 2019," Diagouma says.

And then there's the eight-episode TV series *Tehran* (2020-), directed by Daniel Syrkin and starring Shervin Alenabi and Navid Negahban. The show, which follows the story of a Mossad agent who works as computer hacker in his home city of Tehran, has



The eight-episode TV series *Tehran* was shot in and around Athens and follows the story of a Mossad agent who works as computer hacker in the Iranian capital

an Israeli, American and Greek cast. "The crew had to work hard to convert parts of Athens, including Eleftherios Venizelos, also known as Athens International Airport, into the city of Tehran," Diagouma adds.

EKOME offers visiting productions all the infrastructure and assistance they need. "What that means in practice is that, once a production comes to Greece, we take care of all aspects of the servicing of the production," Diagouma says.

She adds that EKOME is currently setting up a network of film offices across Greece, starting with 15 offices in 13 regions, and two in the major cities of Athens and Thessaloniki. "These offices will act as a one-stop-shop for international and local productions, facilitating the work of professionals with everything from permits to absolutely any kind of help they require," Diagouma says. "We regard Greece as a natural studio. At EKOME, we are an building infrastructure for the audiovisual sector capable of welcoming any kind of production. This is why our motto is 'Greece, your idea in action!'"

Greece can imitate many places in the world, according to Elena Priovolou of Argonauts Productions. "In Athens, you can double pretty much any Middle Eastern country — and Athens also has areas that can imitate an upscale neighbourhood in Italy or France," she adds. "On top of that, the nature here is so diverse that it can double for pretty much any country. We even have desert on the island of Lemnos..."

Greece also has an average of 250 sunny days per year, along with very long days during the summer season, which makes it ideal for shooting exteriors. Another plus point, Priovolou adds, is that distances are short: "Within a few miles or hours, you can go from urban to seaside to the mountains."

While it is relatively easy to film in most locations in Greece, obtaining permission to shoot in public spaces and archaeological locations can take time. That said, the new government is planning

to introduce a procedure that will make this process easier and faster.

And Greece's crews are not only multi-lingual, but also hard working and adaptable. "Our local crews are as experienced as any crew around the globe, but they also bring with them an ingenuity and improvisational spirit that you don't find elsewhere," Priovolou says. "That's partly because we don't have some of the luxuries our international colleagues have, so we are very creative and very invested in our work. You'll never hear a Greek person say, 'That's not my job...', because they regard every aspect of a production as their responsibility. And that, in turn, is because they love this job and put their hearts into it."

Given the popularity of Greece's diverse and unique locations, careful management is essential: "We are a small country and we could become overcrowded if too many productions were shooting at the same time," she says. "But our ability to handle that is growing and will improve further in the next few years. Things are changing for the better and servicing shoots is very much an emerging industry. One thing to remember, though, is that anything that concerns filming in public places takes time to organise."

## DOUBLING UP THE INCENTIVES

**GREECE'S** new tax-credit programme is applicable to any physical or legal entity that invests in a film or TV series in the country. Qualifying projects are eligible for a tax return of 30% of their net taxable income. The eligibility criteria are the same as those that apply to the existing cash-rebate programme, which amounts to 35% of the eligible expenses incurred in Greece for all beneficiaries. The two incentives work together, with one supporting production and the other supporting investments from private investors. These both take the form of automatic funding and may be combined to make up to 50% of the total production budget of a project.

**"WE REGARD GREECE AS A NATURAL STUDIO AND WE ARE BUILDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE AUDIOVISUAL SECTOR CAPABLE OF WELCOMING ANY KIND OF PRODUCTION"** VASILIKI DIAGOUMA