

**SETTING THE SCENE – THE ROLE OF
FILM IN NATIONAL IDENTITY**

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Between the period of October 05th and 08th 2009 government leaders from within the Travel & Tourism (T&T) world united in Astana, Kazakhstan for the 18th Annual General Assembly of the UNWTO. Over a thousand members of the Tourism community, including Ministers of the over 155 member countries in 7 regions, along with over 400 Affiliate members – the ‘A List’ of Tourism at government level - gathered for annual deliberations, as well as the confirmation of Mr Taleb Rifai as the new Secretary General. United in a quest to increase the profile and understanding of the T&T sector as a major force for social and economic development worldwide, in a year where the global economic crisis and H1N1 pandemic have taken a direct hit at the sector, leaders of global T&T traveled to Astana committed to impact, unity and contribution.

Kazakhstan proved to be a wonderful host nation for the UNWTO's Annual General Assembly. A relatively new nation on the world map, Kazakhstan's streets reflect an energy of dramatic change, grand vision and modern ambition. Astana is a baby city waiting for the world. Its exceptional city planning structure and unique architecture makes it very clear – Kazakhstan is on the world stage as a strong, serious, shiny new player!

STAR POWER

Unfortunately, prior to arriving to Kazakhstan most participants did not have a spontaneous mental image of the country or city to seed anticipation of arrival. More often than not, however, mention of imminent travel to Kazakhstan prompted an immediate, inescapable response from family, friends and associates: “BORAT”!

All these years on, despite time, media and destination campaigning, it is the movie BORAT and its infamous lead character who defines the identity of this nation. He and his antics have embedded in Kazakhstan a tainted sense of the place and its people – who they are, what they look like, how they think, how they

live their lives. While understood to be a movie and therefore dosed with a high degree of exaggeration for entertainment purposes, people around the world exposed to even simply the trailer of the movie, or the flurry of PR generated by the film, hold direct associations between the name of the nation and the very original, to some audiences very funny, and most often very offensive character Borat. Such a shame.

BORAT is an exceptional example of the power of film in building destination awareness. And the importance of managing the impact on destination identity.

MAKING IT IN THE MOVIES

Over the past decade the film industry has become a highly sought after vehicle for destination development. National and regional tourism authorities are investing more and more time, money and energy into courting film studios to come to their country and cities to shoot; opening up the landscapes, street systems and communities to film crews. High levels of information and incentives are put forward to persuade studios to set up camp.

The featuring of a destination in a film can be through a number of formats including, *inter alia*,:

- 1) The destination as a generic filming environment, as occurred in films such as *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. The nation's magnificent natural, blank canvas enabled the creators of the film to bring a fictitious trilogy to life in a nation which only through film promotion was revealed to be New Zealand.
- 2) A city/country-identifiable location for films seeking unique locations with the cachet of iconic imagery. *ANGELS AND DEMONS*, for example, turned Vatican City into a fabulous backdrop for a story which, much through its movie recreation, generated understanding and interest in the home of a global religion. Bollywood has started employing this approach, turning iconic international cities

such as Cape Town into a backdrop for its increasingly globally appreciated Indian films.

3) Creating a character out of the location of the film, as was done with *SEX AND THE CITY* the movie (and the television series, of course) – a production which overtly defines NYC to be the '5th lady',

and the grand prix,

4) Incorporating the destination as a part of the film's name and storyline, as occurred, for example, with the epic production of *AUSTRALIA* – effectively a 2 ½ hour product placement for the destination and its magnificent Outback. Similarly, *VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA* provided audiences with a wonderful expose of Spain's attraction-rich city on the Mediterranean coastline.

BENEFITS OF THE BIG SCREEN

There are a number of clear benefits which come from offering a destination for filming. In addition to exposure, there are the often unseen gains to the destination. These include:

- **Income:** money brought to the destination through the local purchase of materials, supplies, accommodation, internal travel, vehicle and prop hire, etc.;
- **Investment:** funds injected into the destination for building of sets and supporting infrastructure needed by the film, and which often remain in the destination after the film crews have left;
- **Employment:** job creation for locals in the areas of set creation, support services, catering, and other production-related elements, as well as inclusion as extras;

- Skills development: training given to locals to assist with the various aspects of production, skills which remain with local employees long after the film's creators have departed;
- Media: feature of the destination in pre-publicity, features on the film including 'the making of' programmes,
- Awareness: the very real exposure which the destination receives which not only educates viewers around the destination and its scope of natural, cultural, social and emotional offerings, but entices travelers to visit to experience it all for themselves. Film can be an exceptional fuel for T&T sector growth, development and competitiveness.

All of the above are strong motivations and justifications for a destination rolling out the red carpet to the international film industry.

THE RISKS TO IMAGE

There are, however, very real risks involved with destination appearances in films. These risks come as a result of the destination not recognising and/or owning the result of the destination awareness created by the film.

The issue is this: awareness does not mean positive image.

Creation of a film in and/or about a destination requires conscious, pro-active, comprehensive destination image management on the part of the destination, especially its Tourism sector. Giving credit where it is due, *BORAT* was very valuable to Kazakhstan to put the nation on the mind-map of people of the world. But once people learnt of it and had an initial sense of the people, the spark needed to be fueled from there by the nation's leaders of national image and identity. As a result of only a low level of reactive destination marketing, the image of *BORAT*

rubbed off quickly and deeply onto Kazakhstan. And is not unlike a tattoo on the nation's image.

India faced the risk of a similar situation with the unexpected, magical success of *SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE*. There was significant concern that the image of the slums would create over-riding assumptions about the identity on India. This did not happen; however, as destination India has for the past 5+ years managed its national image and identity development incredibly. It was therefore possible to position the film's story, success, and subsequent benefits to the nation within the greater national identity – a colour of the prism, not the material of the crystal.

There is no question that the film industry can be one of the greatest blessings for a destination to be able to establish traveller:

- awareness,
- appeal,
- affinity, and
- travel booking action.

Like all tourism sector development initiatives critical to building the destination's Brand, infrastructure, experience delivery and future strength, the role of film needs to be an active part of the destination's Growth and Development Strategy.

When it comes to destinations becoming stars in the film industry, the bottom line can be rich and enriching, as long as all aspects of impact are taken into account.

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