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Pros Pick Best Places for Filmmaking Industry insiders choose world's greatest locations

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Variety recently conducted an online poll among several hundred location managers, unit production managers, cinematographers, directors and assistant directors asking them to rate their favorite locations according to visual appeal, incentives, film-office support, production resources, and ability to substitute for another location.

The top five North American locations and the top five international locations, ranked here by overall excellence, are regions or cities that scored high on most or all of the criteria. Following these top 10 locations is a list of places cited by the polled pros for excelling in specific categories.

TOP 5 NORTH AMERICAN LOCATIONS

#1 California

Los Angeles and environs, San Diego, San Francisco and spots throughout the state

While California reels from the double whammy of a lousy economy and continued runaway production, it's easy to forget just how much the state has to offer. It still has the deepest talent pool -- both in front of and behind the camera -- and the largest and most technologically advanced production infrastructure and equipment in the world.

Plus, the state offers varied outdoor locations, including snow-capped mountains, sandy beaches, rolling vineyards and misty forests -- not to mention the hilly streets of San Francisco and palm-fringed urban landscape of L.A. The state's coast has hosted such films as "Sideways" and "Pirates of the Caribbean 3," its arid stretches have doubled for Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the center of the action is Hollywood, the longtime center of the global entertainment industry, with its backlots and studios.

Now, for the first time, California has taken steps to stem runaway production. The state enacted a 20%-25% tax credit -- in a bill signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who made his name in Hollywood -- that went into effect July 1.

#2 New York

Manhattan, the rest of New York City plus upstate locations

Filmmakers have flocked to the Big Apple since the early days of cinema, drawn by its restless energy, its world-famous skyscrapers and backdrops that range from the mansions of Fifth Avenue to the gritty back alleys of Hell's Kitchen. There's no more authentic place capture a New York street scene, as Oliver Stone is currently doing in "Wall Street 2," or to create a mythical New York, as Woody Allen has done.

The city boasts an abundance of skilled crews and major studios like Silvercup, Kaufman-Astoria and Steiner -- plus the facilities of the TV networks headquartered there.

Outside the city, filmmakers have long explored locations ranging from Long Island, the Hudson Valley, the Catskills and other picturesque regions. Helping the state attract productions: a 30%-35% refundable state tax credit on qualified expenses.

#3 New Mexico

Albuquerque, other cities and remote areas

Known for scenery that ranges from white desert sands to forested mountains, New Mexico also offers a 25% tax rebate on all production costs and local labor payments. This aggressive incentive has spurred a heavy production slate, promoting growth in studio and stage space. This year alone has seen 15 major feature film productions as well as various TV series. The newest facility is the



giant Albuquerque Studios complex, joining Albuquerque-based Rio Grande Studios. But while Albuquerque remains the center of gravity, production is also moving to remoter areas like Deming ("Indiana Jones 4"), Clovis ("Believe in Me") and Las Cruces ("Transformers"). The state claims the largest crew base outside the coasts -- more than 3,000. A new studio complex is being built in Santa Fe: **Santa Fe Studios**.

#4 Chicago

Prototypical urban America

With its iconic downtown skyline, mix of traditional and radical architecture, historic neighborhoods and modern city life -- all fronted by Lake Michigan -- the Windy City exerts a powerful pull over filmmakers. Add in the 30% transferable tax credit and it's clear why the Illinois Film Office has been successful. Since the late '80s, more than 800 feature films and television projects have made use of local soundstages (the Chicago Production Center, Chicago Studio Center, NBC Studio) and the city's cinematic locations, including "Public Enemies," "Traitor," frequent visitor "ER" and "The Dark Knight." Chicago, a center of advertising and TV commercial production, also boasts a deep crew base, high-end post facilities and multiple equipment-rental houses.

#5 Louisiana

New Orleans, other cities and parishes

Louisiana isn't just the boisterous Big Easy, soggy bayous and graceful old plantations draped with Spanish moss. The northeast has pine forests, rolling hills and small towns that can double for many other places. But the state's main attraction may be its 25% transferable tax credit coupled with large studio and stage facilities. These include Raleigh Studios Baton Rouge, StageWorks in Shreveport and Louisiana Film Studios in Elmwood. Shreveport also boasts the Louisiana Wave Studio, with a 750,000-gallon tank originally built for Disney's "The Guardian." New Orleans has bounced back post-Katrina; Tony Scott and Jerry Bruckheimer got the ball rolling by shooting "Deja Vu" there soon after the disaster. Shreveport has positioned itself as a production center ("Mad Money," "True Blood," "Premonition"), and local locations doubled for Washington, D.C., in Oliver Stone's "W."

TOP 5 INTERNATIONAL LOCATIONS

#1 Morocco

Cities and landscapes

A short list of filmmakers who've shot in Morocco reads like a Who's Who of Old Hollywood: Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Huston, Henry Hathaway and David Lean. More recently, Morocco was the location for Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ" and "Kundun"; Oliver Stone's "Alexander"; and Ridley Scott's "Gladiator," "Black Hawk Down," "Kingdom of Heaven" and "Body of Lies." Other high-profile productions include "Babel," "Troy," "The Mummy" franchise and "Prince of Persia," currently filming. The country's locations range from Mediterranean coastline to mountains and desert, and uniquely Moroccan skylines in Casablanca, Tangiers, Marrakech, Fez and Rabat.

The country boasts a solid cinema infrastructure. Thanks to their long experience, Morocco's film companies have developed a full gamut of production services, including location scouting, equipment and office rental, crew hiring, shooting permits, transportation, catering and accommodations. Local crews are often bilingual and accustomed to working with foreign productions, and location fees are low. Film companies also coordinate the use of the Moroccan military for the use of tanks, helicopters and aircraft in battle scenes -- assets that might be prohibitively expensive elsewhere.

#2 France

Paris, Provence and the Dordogne region

For an atmosphere of romance, fine cuisine and visual splendors, it's hard to beat France. The iconic cityscapes of Paris -- the Eiffel Tower, Montmartre, the Seine -- have long provided backdrops for films about love and food ("Julie & Julia" being the latest) as well as actioners ("Rush Hour 3"). And in the south and west, Provence and the Dordogne region offer filmmakers a different kind of beauty, with lavender fields, sleepy villages, ruined castles and the spectacular cliff-hugging roads of the Riviera where James Bond raced his Aston Martin. France has a network of 40 film commissions, experienced crews, deep infrastructure and a long history of filmmaking expertise and foreign production ("G.I. Joe," "The Bourne Ultimatum," "The Da Vinci Code," "Ocean's 12"



to name just a few recent examples). The nation's new tax rebate, which the French Parliament enacted last December, created a credit for foreign productions shot in France.

#3 Prague

Center of Central European filmmaking

Prague's long, rich tradition of filmmaking didn't begin with Milos Forman and Saul Zaentz's "Amadeus," but that production helped put the visually beautiful and culturally rich capital of the Czech Republic back on the international stage. Since then, such high-profile films as "Mission: Impossible," "Casino Royale" and "Hannibal Rising" have taken advantage of the city's locations and film-friendly atmosphere. Prague also boasts some of the largest stages in Europe in the Barrandov complex; recent productions include a Disney "Narnia" sequel and "The Illusionist." The latter also used local post/vfx house Universal Production Partners (UPP) for all the effects. Since its establishment in 1994, UPP has worked on shots for Tom Tykwer's "Perfume" and Ron Underwood's "The Year Without Santa Claus," among others.

#4 Spain

Madrid, Barcelona and the Canary Islands

An extensive coastline, desert scenery, high mountains and a culturally rich and diverse architecture have long helped Spain's cinematic development. The country has doubled for the American West (Sergio Leone's "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly"), the Muslim Middle East and many other world locations. Helped by Spain's fledgling incentives, Madrid and Barcelona have attracted filmmakers such as Woody Allen and have also grown into major production centers, supported by homegrown talent including Pedro Almodovar. The cities of Zaragoza and Aragon formed the backdrop to Guillermo del Toro's "Pan's Labyrinth," Malaga is busy with features and commercials, and Alicante now boasts the Ciudad de la Luz studio complex. Spain's Canary Islands offer the rugged, volcanic locations seen in Stanley Kubrick's "2001."

#5 U.K.

London, Edinburgh and elsewhere

The U.K. has a deep pool of acting talent, extensive infrastructure and great crews and facilities -- including the Ealing and Pinewood

studios -- that can handle all levels of production, from the biggest sets of the James Bond and Harry Potter franchises to the smallest indie pics. The U.K. also offers an aggressive rebate program. For films budgeted at less than £20 million (\$31.8 million), filmmakers can earn up to a 25% tax credit. Add in the natural beauty of the countryside, a widely spoken world language and the architectural appeal of cultural hot spots such as Bath and Edinburgh -- and the advantages become apparent. Contributing to the industry's health today: a plethora of productions from overseas and the solidly booked post and vfx industry in London's Soho

HONORABLE MENTIONS, PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Best Visual Appeal

Croatia, Hawaii, Panama

Croatia boasts World Heritage sites (Dubrovnik's Old City, Split's Palace of Diocletian), the stunning Dalmatian coastline and Plitvice Lakes National Park with waterfalls and 16 azure lakes. Hawaii is U.S. soil and offers good infrastructure, plus jungle, rain forest, towering cliffs, waterfalls, beaches and sunsets -- and beautiful weather. With its relative proximity to the U.S. and more than 30,000 square miles of terrain, Panama presents filmmakers with a variety of locations, including tropical rain forest, Caribbean beaches, volcanic areas, islands and a cosmopolitan skyline.

Best Incentives

Michigan, Georgia, North Carolina

Michigan grabbed the tax-break spotlight with its pumped-up package of a refundable, assignable credit that ranges from 30% to a whopping 42% of a production's eligible expenses. And the required minimum in-state spend is only \$50,000. Georgia offers a transferable tax credit of 20%, with a possible further 10% if a state promo logo is included in the finished production. Minimum spend is \$500,000. North Carolina recently upped its incentive to the level of a 25% tax credit on a minimum \$250,000 in-state spend.

Best Film-Office Support

Connecticut, Utah, Vancouver

Connecticut's film office offers an online production guide, location gallery and



information on local crews, casting and infrastructure. It also serves as a clearinghouse for tax-break information and production services. Vancouver long ago earned the title "Hollywood North," and the British Columbia Film Commission recently celebrated its 30th anniversary of helping productions such as "Night at the Museum 2: Battle of the Smithsonian" and "Watchmen" find locations, crews and post facilities. The Utah Film Commission helps filmmakers deal with permitting, local government agencies and locations that range from "John Ford country" backdrops to alpine meadows and woodlands.

Best Production Resources

Sydney, Montreal, Toronto

Sydney's Fox Studios Australia is a major world destination for film and TV production, and the city has experienced crews and deep infrastructure. Montreal offers expert vfx work, spurred by tax breaks. High-profile films including "The Golden Compass" and "Indiana Jones 4" might shoot elsewhere but

still use Montreal's talent pool for effects. Toronto, long home to a strong film and TV production community, is known for facilities, crews and a range of post, animation and vfx services. The first phase of its ambitious FilmPort studio complex opened last year.

Best Doubles for Other Locations

Buenos Aires, Iceland, Arizona

With its handsome, Eurocentric architecture and ambiance, Buenos Aires has long been known as "The Paris of South America" and can also double for London, Berlin, Rome -- even Mumbai (taxis and the train station are virtually identical). Iceland is home to spectacular, almost otherworldly locations that are surprisingly versatile, which is why Clint Eastwood used it to double for the South Pacific's Iwo Jima in "Flags of Our Fathers." It's not just Arizona's famous canyons, deserts and lakes that can twin for foreign lands: Although set in the Middle East, Universal's "The Kingdom" was primarily filmed in the Phoenix area.

