

# In the Footsteps of Jedi Knights and Sea Pirates

Hollywood Movies and Tourism in Tunisia



Photo 1: Mos Espa film set in Chott el-Gharsa

Tourists from the north of the Mediterranean usually visit Tunisia to enjoy heavenly beaches and Arcadian landscapes as well as the exotic flair of the "Tales from 1001 Nights" and ancient sites of the Roman Empire. But increasingly tourists also travel to southern Tunisia to explore Tatooine – the home planet of *Luke Skywalker* in the "Star Wars" saga. In the ports of Tunisian coastal towns, tourists have started to board pirate ships to navigate the seas like Captain *Jack Sparrow* in the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean". Such Hollywood movie sets in the neighbourhood of tourist regions create imaginary spaces designed to add an additional appeal to the Tunisian destination.

That Hollywood's dream factories are able to convey stories in most impressive ways and succeed in engraving fictional worlds in the memory of consumers comes as no surprise. All types of tales, be they authentic reports or fictitious fairy

tales, interact with the people and societies that consume these tales regardless of the narrative medium that is used. By assimilating metaphors, symbols and rituals, the recipients of fairy tales and novels implicitly create a reality. In this sense there is no difference between real and fictional narratives in terms of effects on the experiential world. The memorized images and associated feelings emerge as unconscious references or as controlling impulses for people by influencing their experiential actions in relevant contexts.

We have emotions with regard to landscapes and objects, such as film locations and simulated pirate ships, just because we have invested our expectations and our wishes in things beforehand or have "combined" them with things. Hence it is possible for us to retrieve and regain feelings and moods when we are at a specific location or standing in front of a certain object (Hasse 2005). In

this manner motion pictures generate potential adventures, experiences and imaginary spaces outside of cinemas (Wuss 1999). Admittedly, some locations and objects lose in part their own history and experiential identity since ascribing fictitious contents generates another reality and lends a certain amount of authenticity to cinematic fiction (Osborne 2000).

## Jedi Knights and the home planet of Luke Skywalker

One late morning in September 2007, more than 80 white all-terrain vehicles with several hundred tourists from the popular resort town Tozeur stop in the middle of an inhospitable region – the Salt Lake Chott el-Gharsa, approximately 13 km to the north of the oasis town of Nefta in southern Tunisia. This modern caravan is headed for Mos Espa, the space port on the desert planet Tatooine. Damaged in the meantime by sand, wind and souvenir hunters, the film set is still worth visiting. Curious and lightly dressed tourists look over the dwellings which are built in the southern Tunisian style of architecture with metal frames, plaster, wood and paper-mâché. Tourists assume adventurous poses and take pictures of each other between the futuristic remains of the film set (Photo 1). The whole setting seems surreal, absurd and curious to uninitiated observers.

This spot which is lonely without tourists is not the only film location that is sought out both by tourists visiting coastal resorts and self-acknowledged "Star Wars" fans (Zimmermann 2003). Like many movies and TV series, "Star Wars" generates a sustainable film tourism (Reeves 2002). It all start-



Figure 1: "Star Wars" world in Tunisia



ed when director *George Lucas* succeeded in finding a production company for a movie script based on a science fiction story he wrote in 1972. Motivated by other Hollywood movies and due to the prevailing political conditions in other countries known for their deserts, *Lucas* embarked on a journey to Tunisia with two location scouts in order to find the ideal landscapes and locations for his movie. He was especially impressed by the architecture of Djerba, the cave homes of Matmata and the salt seas and sand dunes of Tunisia's desert. So he decided to shoot the proposed movie in southern Tunisia (*Rinzler* 2007).

*Lucas* even adopted the exotic names of the settlements and modified them for his movie. For instance the Tunisian town of Tataouine became the desert planet Tatooine. After many setbacks the former anthropology major finally managed to bring his brainchild "Star Wars" to the big screen on 25 May 1977. To produce the sequel to "Star Wars I", *Lucas* returned once more to the former film location in Tunisia. The resounding successes of the six-part saga continue to excite the general public even after more than 30 years, as can be seen by the exhibit

held in London during to the summer of 2007 to mark the saga's anniversary (*Figure 1*).

The film locations in Tunisia have become the most popular destinations of "Star Wars" fans due to the high recognition value of the landscape and locations in the movie, as the statement by *Gus Lopez* illustrates: "*La Tunisie n'est comparable à aucun autre lieu de tournage, on se sent réellement comme sur Tatooine*" (*Faucourt* 2008). A number of film locations have evolved into tourist destinations over the years. This can be attributed primarily to the ability to identify experiential locations with imaginary locations in movies as well as the attractiveness, accessibility and marketing strategies of the locations. Such locations have gained many facets: their cinematic significance and characterization by fans complete the experiential image.

While "Star Wars" fans look for all the locations of the "Star Wars" world, mass tourism has focused on three locations which are part of the fixed program of package tours (*Figure 1*). Only Ksar Hedada is officially marketed by Tunisian authorities as a former film location. The only references to the "Star Wars" location are the

road signs and a huge billboard which stands along the main road leading into the Ksar to inform visitors about its cinematic importance (*Photo 2*).

Other popular destinations of mass tourism include the Hotel Sidi Driss in the cave town of Matmata and the abandoned film set of Mos Espa at Chott el-Gharsa. The interest of the private hotel operator of Sidi Driss and the motivation of agencies offering all-terrain vehicle tours from Tozeur are decisive factors for marketing both these locations. The sanctuaries Sidi Bouhlel on the northern edge of Chott el-Djerid and Sidi Jemour on Djerba cannot be placed in a spotlight as a location of an imaginary world since they are still used religiously as mosque and marabout.

During package tours to Tunisia and excursions from the coast to "Star Wars" locations, it is common practice that the tour guide briefly informs tourists about the locations' cinematic importance. While doing so tour guides frequently intone the music to the movie or imitate the hum of the lightsabers. The locations either represent a generally acknowledged tourist destination, or they only play a marginal role in addition to explanations about the exotic landscape and local culture. The tourists are more or less interested and after taking the typical souvenir photos are asked to board the coach or all-terrain vehicle again.

A visit by fans, however, is completely different – they are well-informed and travel either alone or as part of an organized "Star Wars" round trip specifically to these locations (e.g., Fraport Travel Service 2008). For fans the trip is a journey to the home planet Tatooine and only superficially a trip to Tunisia. At the established fan destinations, these tourists enter the world of "Star Wars" with unbridled enthusiasm, as many statements illustrate: "I have to say that this was the best trip I've ever made, and I've travelled all over the world. To see, touch and experience Tatooine at ground

level was brilliant and I heartily recommend it to any one who can afford the time and money" (*Beckett* 1999).

The subjectively experienced atmosphere of the fictitious world becomes an imaginary reality for fans. These backdrops are modern places of worship, and the fans are modern pilgrims who are transfixed on a level between the experiential movie location and the imaginary space of the movie, where it is possible to take part in the adventures of *Luke Skywalker* and his companions and be close to the hero of the movie and the story. The fictitious world of Tatooine becomes tangible in experiential terms. Here fans are not content with just sightseeing. Instead scenes are re-enacted, just like the original camera angles reproduce the pictures in the movie. Obsessive fans bring their own custom-made robes that resemble the costumes worn by the movie stars and take pictures and video footage of each other in famous poses that can be found in many books. By doing so these tourists feel as if they are one with their movie characters and are thus able to "walk in their footsteps" (*Banthapoodoo* 2006).

The real fans of the movies insist on finding all the locations that are ideally associated with creating the movies. In Tunis people are surprised at the now vacant Hotel du Lac, and with Ksar Soltane tourists come to the southernmost place in Tunisia of the planet Tatooine even though the films were not shot there. Instead photos of local cultural heritage were digitally mastered and integrated in the movie "Star Wars" (*Photo 3*). And a souvenir photo taken in front of the place name sign for Tataouine is essential. The archaeologist and "Star Wars" fan *David Reynolds* even compares the significance of the "Star Wars" locations for tourists in Southern Tunisia with sites of the ancient world. "[Star Wars is] like ancient Rome or Egypt, a culture from another time and place to explore" (*Gleason* 2007).

### Textbox 1: The "Star Wars" empire

The "Star Wars" saga includes six movies altogether.

The idea and screenplay came from *George Lucas* who was a former anthropology major. After several futile attempts, 20th Century Fox Studios decided to finance the costly production (*Knoll and Rinzler* 2005). Contrary to all expectations the movies from the premiere to the last sequel were box office hits. According to *Forbes Magazine* the movies and the "Extended Universe" have generated approximately € 22 billion in revenue (*Greenberg* 2007). "The term Expanded Universe ... came into existence as an umbrella term for all of the officially licensed "Star Wars" materials outside of the two film trilogies. The Expanded Universe includes books, comics, games and other types of various media. These products expand the stories which are covered in the movies. To obtain the rights for such merchandising production, *George Lucas* completely waived the pay for his first "Star Wars" movie from 1977. Since none of the movie companies could have predicted the value of the merchandising rights, the companies accepted *Lucas's* offer (*EW* 2008).

There are countless internet sites where "Star Wars" fans are able to talk about different aspects of the movies. Fans even like to talk shop in online forums about special effects and how they were realized. Technologies, landscapes and species of the cinematic settings are discussed. In blogs fans inform visitors about costumes, fan get-togethers, the most popular comic figures and the best lightsaber replicas available. Online it is also possible to find many references to film locations, progress reports and travel guides, which describe in great detail the locations and their significance for the movies.

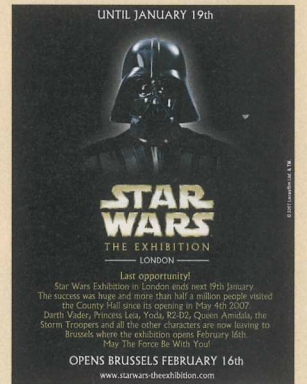


Figure 2: "Star Wars" exhibition poster

As the "Star Wars" saga is not marketed by the government, except for a single film location in southern Tunisia, and *George Lucas* has complete control over the "Expanded Universe" (*Textbox 1*), no film-related infrastructure has evolved, like movie museums, permanent exhibits, signs, figures, sales of devotionals or other merchandising. When it comes to the phenomenon of tourist pirate ships plying the waters of Tunisia's coast, however, it is different story.

### Sea pirates, pirate ships and Tunisia's Mediterranean coast

In the ports of Tunisia, visitors can admire sailing vessels flying pirate flags. These ships are not designed to sail the high seas nor to attack any other ships. Instead the underlying intention is to entertain tourists while slowly cruising along Tunisia's coast from Tabarka on the border with Algeria past Port el-Kantaoui to Houmt Souk on Djerba (*Figure 3*). Altogether there are almost 50 tourist pirate ships waiting to weigh anchor. This

phenomenon is unique across the globe. Although one of the common explanations given by tourists for going on a tour with a Tunisian pirate ship is the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean", this modern pirate fleet draws its inspiration from a different Hollywood movie (*Textbox 2*).

It all started during the mid 1980s when the Tunisian producer *Tarak Ben Ammar* succeeded in canvassing *Roman Polanski* to direct the comedy pirate movie "Pirates" (*Figure 4*). The selected film locations were situated along Tunisia's coast, in particular Monastir. They included the important sailing vessel Neptune which served as a movie set in the marina Port el-Kantaoui which was newly constructed at that time to the north of Sousse. An almost perfect replica of a high-sided merchant vessel dating back to the 16th century, the Spanish galleon "Neptune" was completed within one year in March of 1985. During production the Tunisian authorities issued a wide variety of safety requirements for the floating movie set where all scenes were shot on board in contrast to previ-



Photo 2: Sign at the entrance into Ksar Hedada





Figure 3: Tourist pirate ships in Tunisia

ous pirate movies that preferred movie sets based on land. Owing to the producer's enthusiasm and motivation, the movie set was transformed into a seaworthy ship. The "Neptune" reached five knots using a motor and a wind machine filling the sail allowing the movie set to be filmed as a stately galleon. Although the original plan was to sink the more than US\$ 8 million "Neptune" at the

end of the movie, the producer changed his mind and had the screenplay rewritten.

At first the ship remained anchored in Port el-Kantaoui, becoming an immediate tourist attraction at the marina. For the premiere of the movie and for publicity purposes, the galleon set sail for Cannes where the movie was shown as a non-official entry at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival.

The "Neptune" now weighs anchor in Genoa (Italy; *Photo 4*) where it is maintained and serviced as a film museum for visitors, a party ship for the nouveau riche and as a set for movies and advertisements.

The movie "Pirates" and the movie set "Neptune" still have a considerable impact on Tunisia in spite of the set's absence. For instance a new ship bearing the name "Neptune VI", can now be found in Port el-Kantaoui and serves as a floating restaurant and as a tourist-oriented successor to the movie set. These are not, however, the only mementos of the movie "Pirates". The history of tourist pirate ships begins with a young, outgoing and linguistically talented Tunisian who was working at the newly opened Club Méditerranée in Hammamet. There he held a number of positions, from tennis coach to gardener. He also accompanied boat excursions with tourists. This enterprising young man finally went into business for himself with such excursions. The making of "Pirates" in the marina led him to the idea to enrich his excursions by using a former barge with staged pirate presentations at the end of the 1980s. Thus the tradition of modern pirate ships found its start.

Many tour operators have started to imitate this innovator who now has two ships each capable of accommodating approximately 130 persons. The number of permits for tourist pirate ships has been on the rise especially since 2000. Today it is possible to distinguish two dominant types. The replicated boats are based on the example of the Spanish galleon Neptune. They wait in Port el-Kantaoui, Sousse and Monastir where the movie "Pirates" was made for the most part. In this case, the designers copy the typical stern with balustrade and figurehead. Except for a few intermediate forms, all other boats focus on the style of the former barges from Djerba.

To guide tourists from beaches to the pirate ships, operators and

ship owners work closely together with travel agencies and hotel managers, and even some hotel owners have their own ships. In many ports ship personnel even try to canvass chance customers. Signs and pictures at the moorings show the name of the ship, prices, board and services offered. In Sousse there is one tour operator who claims to own the authentic ship from the movie "Pirates" and advertises such on his sign: "Vacation as in the movie"! International tourists make up their main business. Ships are also rented by Tunisian families to celebrate special occasions, such as weddings and for making videos and advertisements. Cruise programs do differ depending on the port and the operator; most cruises take three to three and a half hours and are offered as late morning or afternoon trips. All day cruises are offered in Djerba and Tabarka. All cruises include food and drinks; note that alcohol is generally not offered. On some ships, especially those in Hammamet and Djerba, young men present entire pirate shows on deck which frequently end with guests cheering (*Photos 5 and 6*).

Many ships also sell t-shirts, bandannas and scarves with diverse pirate logos, such as skull and cross bones, ship names or flags. In this case the season plays a major role with regard to demand; while many ships are booked with seven cruises per day during the busy season, during the winter season some boats are in dry dock and are checked technically and visually for problems. Tickets are subject to a considerable price spread which may range from 15 € just prior to departure to 80 € when booking through an agency or hotel. The reasons for tourists wanting to sail like Captain *Jack Sparrow* stem from the boredom of lying on the beach, children nagging, the desire to see land from the sea and curiosity about the pirate programs offered. Usually the guests enjoy the organized entertainment presented by the ships' crews even if some cruises are considered a flop.

## Textbox 2: "Pirate Film" genre and Roman Polanski's movie "Pirates"

The "pirate film" genre is based on the fate of historic and fictitious pirates from the 17th to 19th centuries. Pirates are always lawless individuals without any national ties who sailed the high seas, seized other ships, plundered as well as captured and executed crews (Zygouris 2007, p. 516). The first noteworthy movie following *Errol Flynn's* passing in the 1950s is the movie "Pirates" directed by *Roman Polanski* and released in cinemas in 1986 (Koebner 2007, p. 518).

The movie was awarded a French film award and was nominated for an Oscar in spite of the fact that it was not successful on the big screen. With the production of "Pirates of the Caribbean" in 2003, *Gore Verbinski* was able to capitalize on the success of other pirate movies from the 1940s and 1950s. "Pirates of the Caribbean" takes up the characters of the movie "Pirates" and seems to pay homage to Polanski's movies with its entire storyline (Feeney and Duncan 2006, p. 128).

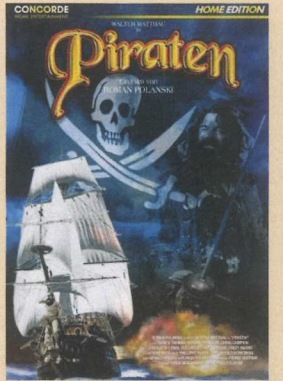


Figure 4: German DVD movie cover for Roman Polanski's "Pirates"



Photo: S. Duschka

Photo 3: "Star Wars" fans in Ksar Ouled Soltane



Photo 4: "Pirates": movie set "Neptune" in Genoa/Italy



The imaginary pirate world exists not only through the imaginative ships but also through the staged presentation in particular. Information about the origin of pirate ships which anchor experientially in the imagination tends to be very adventurous in part. The unseaworthy replicas and decorated barges are marketed as genuine pirate ships from the 17th century which were sunk off the coast of Djerba and have been restored for tourists to enjoy. References to the infamous and notorious corsairs of Tunisia's coast during the 18th century substantiate the truth of the claim, and for holiday pirates the imaginative imaginary world can almost be accepted as a fact. The post-cinematic products are thus anchored in the "real" world several times over. ■

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Photo: C. Engbers

Photo 5: Entertainers during a staged raid on a pirate ship

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Photo: V. Vogelsberg

Photo 6: Tourists on a pirate ship

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