

# Scouting for glory

The right location has to be convincing and it has to be practical. Peter Parnham talks to the locations experts behind NZ-based productions *Tracker* and *The Devil's Rock*.



If it were easy, anybody with a camera would do it, but location scouting is a skill that requires much more than an eye for a pretty place.

According to Jacob McIntyre, location scout and manager for the North Island leg of New Zealand feature *Tracker*, understanding the logistics of how a production will shoot at a location is critical for a successful location scout.

"What makes a good location scout is knowledge of how a film set works, and scouting places that suit that particular shoot," says McIntyre.

"Every production has a different style to it and you scout different locations if you have two vans as opposed to a lot of trucks. *Tracker* was a big Western feel and one of the challenges that set it apart was trying to find big locations – big wide vistas – around Auckland."

Set in 1903, *Tracker* depicts a cat and mouse game played out across New Zealand back country. Ray Winstone plays Arjan, a guerrilla survivor of the South African Boer War who is promised a huge bounty to capture Kereama (Temuera Morrison), a Maori seafarer accused of killing a

British soldier. The UK/New Zealand co-production, directed by Ian Sharp, is on release here this month.

McIntyre says that shooting close to Auckland was driven by a need to keep costs down by staying close to feature film infrastructure. In some scenes this meant using South Island vistas as establishing shots for action sequences shot in the North Island.

"We looked at as much as possible in Auckland for the big landscapes that the director was looking for. Then, through a process of elimination we put the rest of those scenes down for the South Island. Once that was established, we divided up the schedule for the South Island and scouted that area as well," says McIntyre.

He says this is the way it usually works. "You get a director out for an initial recce – an overview – then start getting into specifics, then get into the scheduling and work it out from there."

McIntyre says even near Auckland it was possible to find vistas that didn't have tell-tale power lines. Still, there are no snow covered alps near Auckland and Phil Turner, a



## Locations

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Queenstown-based location scout and manager, handled the South Island leg of the shoot.

“It was very much a raw New Zealand turn of the century look,” says Turner. “The great thing about Queenstown is that it is a good South Island film base that has grown out of the television commercials and big feature films that have come over the years.

“An hour up the road we utilised Glenorchy’s big epic mountains, rivers and forest – things that really haven’t changed going back to that period of the film. Every way we pointed the camera we always had valleys to ourselves.”

Matching natural early 20th century landscapes from the North and South Islands into a seamless visual narrative may be all in a day’s work for McIntyre and Turner, but matching Wellington’s coastline with the English Channel Islands under German occupation during the Second World War presented a different kind of challenge for film maker Paul Campion.

*The Devil’s Rock* is Campion’s debut as a feature film director. One of the ways to keep costs down on the low budget production was to do the location scouting himself.

The genre movie is set in the Channel Islands on the eve of D-Day, when two Kiwi commandos are sent to destroy German gun emplacements only to discover a Nazi occult plot to unleash demonic forces to win the war.



The Devil’s Rock images courtesy NZ Film Commission.

It might be only a tiny percentage of the prospective audience that would be familiar with the movie’s supposed settings, perhaps from visiting or looking at coffee table books of Guernsey’s coastline. Nevertheless Campion was determined to get an authentic look.

Campion is British – he moved to Wellington in 2000 to work in the VFX post production for *Lord of the Rings*. “I’ve been to the Channel

Islands quite a lot, and when the film all happened I did a recce back in Guernsey. I went around the whole coastline looking at where all the real fortifications are, and realised that it was quite a good match, so I knew we could get away with shooting in Wellington,” he says.

“The only problem was the colour of the sand – on the Channel Islands it is nice golden sand, whereas in Wellington it is all a bit grey. We didn’t

really have the facility to change the colour of the sand unfortunately, but we were shooting day for night as the opening act takes place at night time.”

Campion says they used matte paintings to extend the coastline. “It gave us some wider shots. We wanted cliffs and beaches covered in tank traps so we built a couple of tank traps, but populating the rest of the beach was a matte painting job.

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"We also had a German concrete fortification sitting on the cliff top, which is based on a real fortification in Guernsey. So every shot of that was a matte painting too."

He says matte painting in computers is akin to the type of painting that used to be done on glass and placed in the matte box on the camera.

"We weren't really creating a digital environment. I guess most films on a bigger budget would create more of a 3D environment so you can actually move the virtual camera around. We didn't have the budget for that, so what we did was more traditional matte paintings where it would be a 2D matte painting then we would animate the clouds or the sea moving in it."

He says they were based on photographs and painted in Photoshop.

"It's all very low tech, a lot of the matte paintings in the film were shot on my little pocket camera – that's all I used for the reference. I've had it since 2003 and it's quite outdated and only shoots about 2.5 mega pixels [a full HDTV frame is 2.2 mp]. I used that on *Lord of the Rings* and it does the job, although the VFX supervisor would have liked slightly better photos.

"It's really a question of going out and shooting lots and lots of reference photos of cliffs and beaches and seas, and I shot lots of reference



photos in the Channel Islands. We've got the actual cliffs underneath the real German fortress in one of the shots.

"I think we got fantastic results especially considering the low budget and time constraints. I know I did more matte painting on this film

than I think I've done in my whole career, even though it was myself and two others."

He says there is an advantage to location scouting when you are the director and the VFX artist. "I guess I can look at any location and work out what I can do without matte paintings

and if I need to do any matte paintings, I know what is practical.

"It's one thing to say 'I want this big wide shot' and 'I want this camera movement' but if you don't know the reality of pulling off that shot then it can get very, very expensive in post production." ●