

Building itineraries around Oscar nominees

TRAVEL

By Elaine Glusac - The New York Times



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For armchair travelers, a film may be the best way to get to, say, Italy — or, if you're a "Star Wars" fan, the planet of Ahch-to. But for those who actually like to get on a plane, a movie's location can determine an entire itinerary.

In fact, films and television shows often serve, long after the fact, to drive tourism.



Roughly 60 million people annually choose travel destinations based on what they see on big and small screens, according to Stefan Roesch, the author of "The Experiences of Film Location Tourists" and the director of FilmQuest, which offers tours to film locations.

Some films attract travelers based on their connection to place. "Sideways," the 2004 film set in the California wine country outside of Santa Barbara, created a tourism boom that still resonates today, particularly around Buellton, which is home to several "Sideways" locations.

"It's a cult film that people will watch before coming here to refresh their familiarity with the place," said Kathy Vreeland, the executive director of the Buellton Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau.

Other movies become tourist attractions even when the story is otherworldly. In New Zealand, where "The Lord of the Rings" was shot, travelers still flock to the film sets and production sites related to the trilogy, which was released between 2001 and 2003, thanks in part to Tourism New Zealand's campaign promoting them.

Whether intimately associated with their settings (like “Dunkirk”) or relying on alluring destinations to create fictional locales (like “Star Wars: The Last Jedi”), below are the most travel-related films of this year’s Academy Awards nominees and how to visit them.

‘Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri’

The town of Ebbing in director Martin McDonagh’s film is fictional. But McDonagh, who also wrote the screenplay for “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri” — about a mother’s efforts to get her daughter’s murder solved — brought the place to life via three North Carolina towns.

“He wanted a Main Street, USA, feel that people could easily relate to and looked like it could be Anywhere, Middle America,” said Guy Gaster, the director of the North Carolina Film Office.

Sylva, in western North Carolina, played a central role, hosting the Ebbing Police Department (actually a home décor store) and the advertising company across the street from which Frances McDormand’s character, Mildred Hayes, hurls flaming bombs. In nearby Dillsboro, Country Traditions, a food and wine store, played the gift shop where Mildred worked. The titular billboards were constructed on a scenic road near Black Mountain. Visit North Carolina has created a three-day itinerary that identifies many of the film’s locations.

McDonagh’s story can’t be called inspirational, but viewers have responded to the backdrop in the region’s wooded, rolling hills rather than the plot, explained Gaster. He noted that fans of “The Last of the Mohicans,” a 1992 film with a tragic conclusion, still seek out filming sites such as Chimney Rock State Park.

“People do see the difference between what is really there and what the story line is,” he said.

‘Dunkirk’

Nominated for eight Academy Awards, including best picture and director, “Dunkirk” captures the World War II evacuation of Allied soldiers from the port of Dunkirk in northern France in 1940. The plan, known as Operation Dynamo, saved more than 338,000 troops.

Director Christopher Nolan shot much of the film in Dunkirk, where a walking tour visits Malo-les-Bains, the seaside area depicted in the movie, and East Mole, the breakwater that was vital to the evacuation and was partly rebuilt by the production (120 euros for up to 30 people, or about \$150).

Like the popular D-Day beaches in Normandy, the real-life Dunkirk is strewn with World War II wreckage, especially visible at low tide. Near the beach, the Dunkirk 1940 Museum tells the Operation Dynamo story.

Travelers can see Dunkirk from the point of view of a Royal Air Force pilot on a 15-minute aerial tour aboard a light aircraft (120 euros for up to three people).

‘Call Me by Your Name’

The opening frames of the best-picture nominee “Call Me by Your Name” indicate the setting is “somewhere in northern Italy.” And indeed, the film location, including the homey villa where the main characters reside, is in Lombardy, the part of the country that includes Milan and the Lakes Region.

The enchanting countryside where the protagonists have long meals in gardens, swim in idyllic ponds and cycle through medieval towns is a seductive character in its own right.

“Italy is often the backdrop for romantic stories, both on screen and off, but the better-known destinations — Venice, Tuscany, the Amalfi Coast — are usually the settings,” said Kathy McCabe, the host of the TV show “Dream of Italy.” “This movie reminds us that there are so many more layers of Italy for travelers to explore.”

The film’s director, Luca Guadagnino, centered production on the town of Crema, roughly 30 miles east of Milan, and his characters made jaunts to Lake Garda, one of the region’s lakes with an Alpine backdrop. They also visit Cremona, saluted by UNESCO for its traditional violin making, the walled city of Bergamo in the Alpine foothills and, outside of Bergamo, the dramatic Serio Waterfalls, Italy’s highest cascades.

‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’

Nominated for four Academy Awards, including original score, “Star Wars: The Last Jedi” picks up Luke Skywalker’s story line where the previous film left off — on the planet of Ahch-to, the fictional shelter played by the real-life monastic retreat Skellig Michael, a steep and rocky island off the southwest coast of Ireland.

Although the film was also shot on location in Bolivia and Croatia, the production expanded to feature more of Ireland, including coastal locations such as Loop Head in County Clare and Malin Head in Donegal. Most of these areas lie along the Wild Atlantic Way, a name given by Irish tourism to the country’s west coast.

The tour company Zicasso guides guests to many of these sites in a new eight-day itinerary called “Ireland and the Last Jedi Encounter” (from \$2,975 a person).

'Lady Bird'

The main character in "Lady Bird" can't wait to get out of Sacramento, which she calls "the Midwest of California." But in the course of director Greta Gerwig's coming-of-age film, she comes to appreciate the charms of California's capital.

Nominated in five categories, including best film, director and actress, "Lady Bird" will be the subject of running and walking tours of Sacramento starting this month by Sac Running Tours. The 3.2-mile walking tour and the 4.5-mile running version (both \$20 a person) focus on East Sacramento, including the Fabulous Forties neighborhood, where the main character indulges in real estate envy, and the McKinley Park Rose Garden, where she stargazes.

"Sacramento is a lot cooler than people give it credit for," said Jenn Kistler-McCoy, the owner of Sac Running Tours. She aims to add bike tours that will range farther and include visits to other locations featured in the film, including Tower Bridge and Gunther's Ice Cream shop.

For independent travelers, Visit California has compiled a list of "Lady Bird" filming locations, including Thrift Town, where the movie mother and daughter shop for dresses. The list created by Visit Sacramento includes many of the city's vintage neon signs captured in the film.