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ISLAND LIFE
ITV's series "The Durrells" wrapped its final season on Corfu, which has been named the continent's best location by the European Film Commission Network.

GREECE OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Incentives, locations draw more foreign productions

STORY BY CHRISTOPHER VOURLIAS



AS THEY BEGAN PREPARING "The Trip to Greece," the fourth installment in Michael Winterbottom's acclaimed comedy franchise starring Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, the creative team returned to the time-tested formula that made the previous three chapters so successful: a combination of food, wanderlust and the comedians' impeccable improv skills.

But with Winterbottom insisting this will be the franchise's final installment, producer Melissa Parmenter, of Revolution Films, says the decision to re-create the epic journey of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca in modern-day Greece gave the project added poignancy.

"Steve is continuing his journey back home, like Odysseus," she says. "Being the last one for this idea of an epic journey is quite special."

Nearly a decade after the "Trip" franchise launched, the long-time collaborators were on familiar ground in more ways than one. Last year Winterbottom, Parmenter and Coogan traveled to Greece to film "Greed," a satire about a retail billion-

aire that was shot on the island of Mykonos. Lensed just months after Greece introduced a 35% cash rebate, the two projects are among the growing number of foreign productions to take advantage of attractive incentives and scene-stealing locations in this Mediterranean nation.

It's a welcome turn-around for a country still recovering from a nearly decade-long economic downturn. Greece has approved nearly 70 applications for the rebate in the past year, including the 2018 Ink Factory adaptation of John Le Carré's "The Little Drummer Girl," directed by Chan-wook Park for the BBC and AMC; and the forthcoming John David Washington starrer "Born to Be Murdered," a political thriller directed by Ferdinando Cito Filomarino and produced by Marco Morabito and Luca Guadagnino.

The change has been especially dramatic in light of where the country was just a few years ago. When producer Christopher Hall went into pre-production on "The Durrells," ITV's hit adaptation of author Gerald Durrell's memoir of his fam-

ily's time in Corfu, Greece was in the grips of a profound political crisis that sparked fears of an impending exit, or Grexit, from the European Union.

The series' producers began scouting other Mediterranean locations, including Croatia and Malta, which offered both stability and generous tax incentives. But Hall and producing partner Sally Woodward Gentle "were adamant that Corfu is absolutely a character in the works of Gerald Durrell," whose family called the island home before World War II.

Four years later, "The Durrells" wrapped its fourth and final season on Corfu, which last year was named the continent's best location by the European Film Commission Network and Cineuropa. The series was able to take advantage of the cash rebate for Season 4, while Hall witnessed not only a gradual recovery after Greece nearly crashed out of the Eurozone, but a significant improvement in the capacity of the local crew base.

Expanding its size and skill set is vital to the growth of the Greek industry, says Venia Vergou, director of the Hellenic Film Commission. Launched in 2017 as a directorate of the government-funded Greek Film Center, the commission has been instrumental in the post-crisis reboot of the Greek biz, streamlining the permitting process for monuments and archaeological sites, while also collaborating with the National Center of Audiovisual Media and Communication, the government body tasked with administering the incentive scheme, to create a network of regional film offices that can help coordinate shoots around the country.

That initiative also will help to spotlight Greek locations beyond the familiar attractions of ancient monuments and sun-splashed beaches. Elsewhere, Greece boasts snow-capped mountains, forests, lakes and cityscapes that can double for elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East, according to Vergou.

A significant boost to the country's infrastructure is taking shape in Thessaloniki, where Nu Boyana Film Studios, the Bulgarian production hub that's serviced Hollywood blockbusters including "Rambo: Last Blood," is partnering with John Kalafatis, CEO of the New York City-based York Studios, to build the Nu Boyana Hellenic studio. Reps from Nu Boyana, York and the National Center — who have also launched a training program for young Greek film professionals — will have a press conference on Nov. 8 at the Thessaloniki Intl. Film Festival.

"As the rebate is progressing ... we are focusing on creating a sustainable product and ultimately developing an ecosystem of professionals well-linked to one another, able to deliver, competitive," say the National Center's Vasiliki Diagouma. "It's a huge step. It's something that hasn't been done before in Greece." ❏

FILM LOCAL, ACT GLOBAL

GREECE'S REBATES OPEN DOORS FOR INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTIONS
STORY BY CHRISTOPHER VOURLIAS

● Not long ago, it would have been difficult for Greek production outfit Heretic to board a project such as "Do Not Hesitate," an ambitious, Afghanistan-set war drama that is partly being filmed on the island of Crete.

But for Giorgos Karnavas, who is producing "Hesitate" alongside the Netherlands' Lemming Film, the calculus has changed since Greece introduced a 35% cash rebate last year. "The cash rebate gives us the [ability] to step into projects that we would not be able to otherwise, and is also a tool to attract new projects that appeal to us," Karnavas says.

The rebate has given a fresh jolt to an industry still recovering from the country's crippling economic crisis, with a wave of majority and minority co-productions in the cards from Greek producers. The 35% cash rebate on qualifying spend is available to feature films, documentaries, TV drama series, animated films and digital games, with a minimum spend of €100,000 (\$110,000) for features and TV series.

Leading production company Fairlo House is in post-production on the romantic drama "Monday," directed and co-written by Argyris Papadimitropoulos and starring Sebastian Stan and Dominique Tipper. The film is produced by Christos V. Konstantakopoulos ("Before Midnight"), Brian Kavanaugh-Jones ("Loving"), Damian Jones ("The Iron Lady") and Deanna Barillari ("The Amaranth"), with Fred Berger ("La La Land") exec producing.

Other upcoming titles include "Broadway," the first feature from Christos Massalas, which Amanda Livanou of Neda Film is producing with Bertrand Gore of Blue Monday Prods. (France) and Digital Cube (Romania); Christos Nikou's feature directorial

debut, "Apples," a co-production between Greece's Boo Prods. and Poland's Lava Films, and "Pari," the feature debut of Iranian filmmaker Siamak Etemadi that Heretic is producing with France's Le Bureau, the Netherlands' Topkapi and Bulgaria's Chouchkov Bros.

Homemade Films' Maria Drandaki, who's developing Konstantina Kotzamani's "Titanic Ocean" with Manny Films (France) and De Film (Romania), notes that the cash-back scheme has been a key selling point for international collaborations "as our available tools for co-production before the introduction of the cash rebate were very limited and very unstable."

But she echoes the concerns of other Greek producers about the need to drum up sources of financing beyond the foundering public broadcaster, ERT, and the government-funded Greek Film Center, which this year earmarked \$3.3 million in funding for local filmmakers.

"The cash rebate is more functional, but it can't be the only tool for the production of Greek films," she says.

While another producer bemoans projects "languishing" due to lack of financial support, Vasiliki Diagouma of the National Center of Audiovisual Media and Communication, the government body tasked with administering the incentive scheme, struck a hopeful note that the Greek industry's fortunes are on the rise.

"We know how long it takes for the industry to not just realize that [the rebate is] there ... but also believe in it, embrace it, and fully take advantage of it," she says. "We know that 2020 is going to be the year for Greece, and we're getting ready for that."



NEW WORKS

Upcoming Greek co-productions include "Pari," (above) and "Apples."



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