

A long time ago, in a country not so far away...

DEEP IN THE DESERTS OF TUNISIA, THE REMAINS OF THE *STAR WARS* MOVIE SETS ARE STILL STANDING

BY SCOTT SNOWDEN

You'd have to be a film geek of epic proportions to consider going on holiday to look at an abandoned movie set. There is, however, one notable exception: *Star Wars*. The film's enduring appeal – three decades and counting – means several generations have grown up with images of the movie burned into their consciousness. Some of the most vivid scenes took place on Luke Skywalker's home planet of Tatooine (fig.1). And it's possible to step into that world for yourself if you're prepared to visit the deserts of south Tunisia.

George Lucas was clearly influenced by this people and places of this arid land when he made his first *Star Wars* film. Not only is there actually a town called Tataouine, but many other villages found here share similar names to locations in the movie. You might also notice, as you drive through pockets of primitive settlements after dark, that many locals dress themselves in a hooded cloak-of-sorts that bears an uncanny resemblance to those worn by Jedi Knights.

The numerous locations used for different scenes are dotted around the sands of the northern edge of the Sahara, some close together, others a few hours drive apart. One of the most impressive is a place called Shubiel Gorge (fig.2), commonly referred to these days as *Star Wars* Canyon. This particular site was used many times from different angles: it was where R2D2 was kidnapped by Jawas (fig.3); the site where we were first introduced to Obi Wan Kenobi as he rescues the unconscious Luke Skywalker (fig.4) and even where we first set eyes upon the spectacle of Mos Eisley spaceport from the rocky peak (fig.5). The entrance to the canyon is also where Luke and Obi Wan stumble upon the slaughtered Jawas and their shot-up sandcrawler (fig.6), providing the imperial troops with the final link that leads them to the Lars family homestead.

George Lucas was such a fan of Shubiel Gorge that he filmed here again in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (fig.7). The scene where Indiana Jones threatens to blow up the ark with a rocket launcher was shot here. A truly devoted fan armed with a portable DVD player or printouts of screen-shots might be able to pinpoint the precise angle and spot from which these scenes were filmed. But even if you're not quite that obsessed it's still good fun.

The entrance of Shubiel Gorge is flanked at its highest point by the marabout (sacred tomb) of Sidi Bou Helal and it's located near the village of Kriz – also known as El Mahassen. There's no public transport out here, and there's a little off-road driving to do, so a four-wheel drive is recommended. Exploring the actual canyon

must be done on foot, but this gives a genuine feeling of being somewhere totally barren and bereft of any vegetation or even civilisation.

From Shubiel Gorge, it's only a short drive across the fringe of the desert to the set of Mos Espa, near the salt flat Chott el Gharsa. Here you'll find what's left of a set used in *The Phantom Menace*. Standing alone and abandoned in the desert sands, it's a curious combination of fibreglass, plywood and old pipes. Unfortunately, the igloo-like

buildings are now filled with discarded rubbish from previous visitors. The surging CGI crowds have also been replaced with a shuffling sea of Bedouin salesmen offering stuffed camels and other strange-looking souvenirs.

A few miles northwest of Tataouine, lies the rural town of Ksar Hadada, an ancient Berber village. You'll come across an odd and uniquely shaped structure called a ksar. This was once a fortified grain store that provided the setting for slave quarters in the *Star Wars* prequels, but has long since been converted into a hotel; the Ksar Hadada. It's easy to

see why the eerie, otherworldly architecture could capture the imagination of a director looking to depict an arid, alien planet.

If you then drive a few hours continuing northwest to Matmata, you'll find another hotel – the Sidi Driss. Its sunken courtyard was used for Luke's childhood home. Much of this set still remains intact from the late 1970s and within this troglodyte dwelling (fig.8) is a labyrinth of passageways and sunken rooms. You can enjoy a beer or a coffee and even sit at the same table where Luke and Uncle Owen talked about “staying on one more season” (fig.9).

Most of the old sets you'll come across on your travels are semi-dilapidated, but they are still recognisable to dedicated fans. It may be a fleeting claim to fame, but this represents the entire tourism industry for what is an isolated region of a poor country. Locals therefore jump at the opportunity to capitalise on their contribution to cinematic history. And why not – *Star Wars* would not be the film it was without the splendid isolation of these desert lands.



(FIG.1)



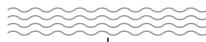
(FIG.2)



(FIG.3)



“Surging CGI crowds have also been replaced with a shuffling sea of Bedouin salesmen offering stuffed camels and other strange-looking souvenirs”



HIGHLIGHTS

All of the old sets and landmarks are great to see, but to actually sit at the same table as Luke and his uncle at the Hotel Sidi Driss is really something. Not only do they not make films like *Star Wars* anymore, but most effects are now made with CGI technology. Even if a set was used, it would more than likely be disassembled after use.

Hotel Sidi Driss, 6070 Matmata Ancienne, Tunisia, Tel: (05) 230005

DESTINATION: TATOOINE



WHEN TO GO

The tourist season begins in the summer and as the temperature increases, so do the size of the crowds. The best time to visit is either just before the beginning of the summer, say **March or April**, or towards the end in **September or October**.



GETTING THERE

Abu Dhabi-based **Eithad** doesn't fly direct to Tunis-Carthage International Airport so you'd have to change at a European capital. However Dubai-based Emirates does, from around **Dhs2,805 return**. (+971 4 214 4444) www.emirates.com

SLEEP

Hotel El Mouradi in the settlement of Douz is a good base for exploring the *Star Wars* sets. Doubles from **Dhs295 (inc bed and breakfast)**. Tel: +216 75 470 303, www.elmouradi.com

Hotel Diar el Barbar is about 1.5km up the Douz road in Matmata and is the nicest hotel in the area. It includes panoramic views of the desert and an outdoor pool. Prices are very reasonable, but vary slightly on season. Tel: +216 05 230 074



EAT

Away from the populated centres, eating out can be a little hit and miss. Most of the larger hotels across the country offer good food at very reasonable prices. However, should you embark on an off-road tour of the Sahara, it's recommended that you pack supplies. Locations like **Hotel Ksar Hadada** and the **Hotel Sidi Driss** that can be incorporated into the expedition offer minimal accommodations and a fairly basic menu.

DRINK

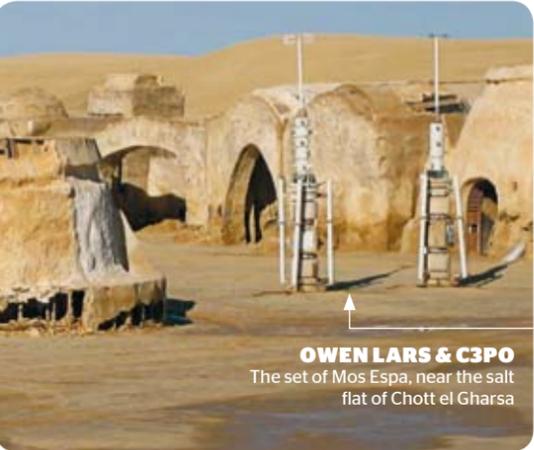
Should you decide to drive across the desert regions and explore this untamed area of the country, you'll be limited to whatever you bring with you. In the cities it's a different story, but don't forget this is still a Muslim country. Consequently, you might find alcohol is limited to hotel bars. One such bar is at the **Hotel Bel Azur** in Hammamet, here you'll find locals and tourists alike and all manner of interesting folk to meet.



Currency: Dhs10 = 3.7 Dinar
Language: French or Arabic



LARS HOMESTEAD: Luke's digs, where he discovers the stolen plans hidden inside R2D2 by Princess Leia.



OWEN LARS & C3PO
The set of Mos Espa, near the salt flat of Chott el Gharsa



Hotel Ksar Hadada



Hotel Diar el Barbar

STAR WARS CANYON OVERVIEW
This composite, Google Earth image shows the different locations used by George Lucas for *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*

(FIG.4) View of Mos Eisley

(FIG.5) View of Mos Eisley

(FIG.6) Slaughter of Jawas

(FIG.7) Raiders – Indy threatens to blow up Ark

(FIG.8) Luke first meets Ben
Sand people attack

(FIG.9) Jawa Rock (entrance to Canyon)

(FIG.9) Slaughter of Jawas