



Australia Provides Martian Stand-In

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Australia's flat, red, rock-strewn Outback is proving an ideal backdrop for a film starring Val Kilmer about the first piloted mission to Mars.

For the past two weeks, cast and crew of the Warner Brothers film "Red Planet" have been shooting in the desert roughly 15 miles from the mining town of Coober Pedy. The bleak, desolate, near featureless terrain has hardly any vegetation.

"Areas around here look almost identical to Mars Pathfinder photos," says Trevor McLeod, special projects officer for the town council. "One place up the road from here is called Moon Plain, because it looks just like the surface of the moon."

Coober Pedy is located in the harsh desert of South Australia, near Australia's geographical center. It's long been popular among science fiction filmmakers. Last September, the still-unreleased American sci-fi film "Pitch Black" featuring Farscape star [Claudia Black](#) was filmed around Coober Pedy. But by far the most famous film shot in the area was 1985's "Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome" in which climactic chase scenes took place along a railroad line roughly 25 miles west of town.

"Red Planet" is set in the near future. Earth is a dying planet and a team of American astronauts is sent to Mars on a last-ditch effort to find a suitable refuge for endangered humanity. As personality conflicts and equipment breakdowns threaten their mission, the astronauts have to work together to survive.

Besides Kilmer, the film also stars Carrie-Anne Moss ("The Matrix") and Terence Stamp ("Superman II" and "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace"). Others in the cast, including Tom Sizemore, Benjamin Bratt and Simon Baker, are better known for non-science fiction roles.

The cast and crew of "Red Planet" arrived in Coober Pedy earlier this month after two weeks of shooting in Wadi Rum, Jordan, where dramatic rock outcroppings provided a different backdrop than the flat Australian desert. The non-Australian portion of the movie originally had been scheduled to be filmed in Iceland, but the location moved to Jordan when production crews couldn't find an area completely barren of vegetation.

Once filming is completed in Coober Pedy, production on "Red Planet" shifts to interior photography at Sydney's Fox Studios. Shooting should wrap up by Christmas, and theatrical release of the film, directed by feature film neophyte Anthony Hoffman, is expected sometime next year.

Primeval verite

So far, clear weather has kept the production on schedule. However, one major dust storm did kick up winds of up to 35 knots [40 miles per hour or 64 kilometers per hour], making the wind machine the crew parked in the center of town a bit of a joke among the locals, McLeod said.

Undaunted, production officials said the natural storms added realism.

"The storms really helped us provide some additional atmosphere," said one production aide reached by phone at the unit's Coober Pedy offices. "But a lot of time also has been spent waiting for the dust to die down, because you can't shoot if the camera's in danger."

While Coober Pedy, Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, Broken Hill in New South Wales and the Flinders Ranges in South Australia offer filmmakers otherworldly film backdrops, the Australian Outback also has attracted its share of scientists over the years.

That's because its terrain has been largely unchanged and untouched in the billions of years since Australia broke off from Antarctica and the prehistoric supercontinent of Gondwanaland.

Renowned comet-finder Eugene Shoemaker used to make yearly trips to the Outback in search of rocks from space that might have fallen here. On July 18, 1997, Shoemaker died in a two-car accident near Alice Springs, north of Coober Pedy.

Most science fictions films shot around Coober Pedy are filmed in the roughly 120-mile square Breakaway's Reserve just 15 miles from town. The nearness of such good locations is one of Coober Pedy's main attractions.

The town also has made a name for itself for such non-science fiction films as "The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert," a road movie about transvestites who travel by bus to Alice Springs. The more recent Australian film "Siam Sunset" chronicled the adventures of an English industrial chemist who travels to the Outback in search of the perfect ochre color to produce for his arts supply company.

To get an idea of the vastness, just south of Coober Pedy lies the Woomera Prohibited Area, a rocket range roughly the size of England. The area was used in the 1960s for Europe's early rocket tests before those operations were shifted to Kourou, French Guiana.

Since then, the range has been underutilized, although a top secret US satellite listening post at nearby Nurrungar provides employment for the tiny town of Woomera itself, located about 180 miles south of Coober Pedy.

The Woomera rocket range is now on the verge of rebirth thanks to a US company -- Seattle-based Kistler Aerospace -- that hopes to start launching reusable rockets from there next year to deliver satellites to low earth orbit. An Australian/Russian joint venture also plans to start offering launches to low earth orbit using converted Russian SS-25 intercontinental ballistic missiles in 2001.

From Mars to Tatoonie?

The vastness of the Outback, coupled with the harsh conditions, each year claim several lives as tourists and adventurers suffer car breakdowns and are unable to make it back to civilization. Some areas can be unvisited for years at a time, since no dirt or paved roads exist across much of the area.

With deep, cloudless blue skies and rich red rock and sand, along with an unbroken flat horizon in all four directions -- it's easy to feel as if you're in atmosphereless, gravity-free world in which you could easily fall off into space.

Roughly half of Coober Pedy's population of about 3,000 live underground in converted mines to escape the searing surface temperatures. The town exists mainly for opal mining, a hit-or-miss business in which finds are generally uncovered at random by digging gingerly through soft underground rock.

While McLeod said he knew of no other productions scheduled to use Coober Pedy in coming months, George Lucas will be gearing up production on the second "Star Wars" prequel at Sydney's Fox Studios early next year.

While the Coober Pedy town council hasn't yet been contacted by Lucas or his representatives to film in the area, Lucas is known to be interested in using Australian locations as backdrops for the film.

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