

Made in Alaska

location report



The Last Frontier

It may take planes, trains and automobiles (not to mention ferries) to get there, but new incentives in Alaska may make it worth the trip

By Todd Longwell

Unforgiving weather can make shooting "Tougher in Alaska" (a History Channel reality series), but will tax incentives woo hesitant productions?



11.24.08

While up in Alaska filmmakers are celebrating the new production incentives signed into law this summer, down in Hollywood studio bean counters have to be a little more reserved. A 30% transferable tax credit is tempting, they say, but do we really want to send our megamillion-dollar production to a remote, frozen frontier outpost?

"There are lots of misconceptions — that we all live in igloos and it's too far to go," says Alaska State Senate Majority Leader Johnny Ellis, who sponsored the tax incentive legislation. "We're a world apart, but we're accessible and we have lots of natural advantages."

One of those is the near-constant sunlight in some areas during the summer months, producing a "magic hour" that lasts four to six hours, accord-

ing to Carolyn K. Robinson, executive producer with the Anchorage-based production house SprocketHeads.

"The DPs love it," Robinson boasts. And, she adds, it doesn't take long to get there. "There are direct flights from Los Angeles that are literally five hours, and you can be in the most beautiful place in the world. You can also fly to snow within 15 minutes outside of Anchorage, 365 days a year."

Alaska's biggest selling point is its vast diversity of terrain, which ranges from temperate rain forests in the southeastern panhandle to the treeless rocky tundra of the Aleutian Islands in the north. In the interior around the city of Fairbanks, there are deep forests and rolling hills where the temperature can go from 90 degrees Fahrenheit in

Made in Alaska

location report



Juneau

ALASKA FILM OFFICE

Caryl McConkie, contact

P.O. Box 110804 ♥ Juneau, AK 99811-0804 ♥ 907-269-8190

alaskafilm@alaska.gov ♥ alaskafilm.org

the summer to 60 below zero in the winter.

A wide variety of looks can be found just outside Anchorage, the state's most populous city with approximately 300,000 residents, constituting more than two-fifths of Alaska's population.

"In 15 minutes, not only can you shoot what looks remote, you can be remote and experience some pretty amazing mountain ranges, waters and glaciers," says Nancy Haecker, location manager for 2007's "Into the Wild." The production went back to Alaska three times to capture the different seasons.

Unfortunately, the remoteness comes with some serious logistical drawbacks. The production infrastructure is minimal, with only a handful of equipment rental houses and a sparse crew base, supported largely by visiting documentary productions, still shoots, and commercial and industrial projects for oil companies and telecoms based in the region. So for the time being, major productions must ship in both gear and talent from larger production hubs like Los Angeles or Seattle.

And transporting person and parcel is no easy task. Alaska is by far the largest state in the union, covering almost 700,000 square miles, but only a small portion of it is accessible via roadways. One can't even drive into the capital city of Juneau;

trucks and autos must float in on a ferry. And just because the map says there's a road there doesn't mean a drivable surface actually exists.

"A road is not a road in Alaska," Haecker points out. "Especially in winter. If you want to get from point A to point B, you better know how to get there if the road is not working."

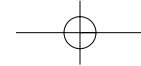
That means flying in small- to medium-size planes or helicopters. The good news is Alaska has a well-developed system of bush air services. The bad news is the weather doesn't always allow it to function, as filmmaker David Huntley discovered while shooting a segment of the History Channel documentary "Alaska: Big America" on the Aleutian Islands in July 2004.

"You would think that would be the most wonderful time of year, because it's endless daylight and relatively warm weather," says Huntley, who also executive produced the recent History Channel series "Tougher in Alaska." "But the Aleutian Islands are infamous for fog in the summer. We were out on a fairly remote island where we had to fly in on a bush plane and be dropped off. We finished our three days of shooting, and the plane could not come back and get us because we were fogged in and the pilot couldn't land. We ended up staying an extra six days. We ran out of food. Luckily, Aleut villagers went out fishing for us and caught us a halibut, and we managed to survive on that for six days."

Given the severity and unpredictability of both the weather and the terrain, it's vital that visiting productions enlist the expertise of locals.

"They have planes and snowmobiles, and they know that in the spring the river goes high, and there's going to be somebody in that area who knows how to cross that river even when it's flooding," Haecker says. "It's a can-do atmosphere. You can make anything happen in those remote areas, and you can make it happen fast."

But the question remains: Will Alaska be given the chance to



PRODUCTION INCENTIVES

Last June, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin re-established the Alaska Film Office and introduced a new production incentive package to encourage filmmakers to shoot large-scale films in the state.

The incentive program provides a base 30% transferable tax credit of qualified expenditures, along with a bonus 10% of qualified expenditures that consist of wages paid to Alaska residents (with no salary cap

per employee per production).

Another 2% bonus can be claimed of expenditures incurred in a rural area, as well as an additional 2% of expenditures made in state between Oct. 1 and March 30. The tax credit may be used to offset taxes, or sold, assigned, exchanged or otherwise transferred in whole or in part within three years.

Producers must incur \$100,000 or more in eligible expenditures over a consecutive

24-month period for the above incentives to be granted. A film production is eligible for a tax credit if the film office determines the production is in the best interest of the state, and consequently, the film office must approve production. The program sunsets in five years or following the issuance of \$100 million in credits, whichever occurs earlier.

— Sarah Schubiner



test that mettle on some major Hollywood film productions? SprocketHeads' Robinson thinks the answer is yes. Not only will the state snag Alaska-set productions that have traditionally shot in places such as Canada (2002's "Insomnia") and New Zealand (2007's "30 Days of Night"), they'll also be

portraying other locales, from Himalayan peaks to Northeastern fishing villages.

Dama Claire, production executive with the Santa Monica-based consulting firm the Incentives Office, believes it's a strong possibility.

"Now that the Canadian dollar is (almost equivalent to) the U.S.

dollar, snowy mountain range stories that have typically been going to Canada could potentially be going to Alaska," says Claire, who helped Alaska formulate its incentive package. "And if you have a story about K2, Mount McKinley looks more like K2 than any wimpy hill in New Zealand." **THR**

RECENT AND CONTINUING SHOOTS:

Grey Jumper Prods.' "Chronic Town"
MGM Home Entertainment's
"Stargate: Continuum"
History Channel's "Tougher in Alaska"

THR.com To check out filming incentives across the country, go to THR.com/madeinusa.

