

ARE THE BAHAMAS HOLLYWOOD'S NEW BEST KEPT SECRET?

Photo by: George Pimentel / Wire Image

There's a reason for everything. Why else would there be a film festival in the Bahamas? Founder and Executive Director Leslie Vanderpool saw the potential in 2004 when she started it. And after this year's event, she may have just set in motion the makings of a marketplace for Hollywood that could eventually rival Sundance and other film festivals around the globe.

Especially if acting legend, Sir Sean Connery, also a Bahamian resident on New Providence Island in the posh community of Lyford Cay, has anything to say about it. The actor spoke to the SRO audience on a night set up to honor actor Nicolas Cage with a Career Achievement Award, and was his usual engaging self, suggesting that within just a few years there's no reason why the Film Festival couldn't go from a three day event to a 10 day extravaganza where Hollywood dealmakers could set up shop. In fact, at presstime, I was told by Connery that the Film Festival will run seven days this year, December 6-13, 2007. [Both Cage and Connery starred in the 1996 prison drama, "The Rock."

And it seems Connery's sentiment has hit a nerve as the Bahamas has been the new island of choice with many of Hollywood's top acting talents recently purchasing homes there. Even Nicolas Cage is now a Bahaman resident, having just bought a property right down the road from Connery in Lyford Cay. In fact, there seems to be some sort of movement going on with Hollywood's new home away from home boasting newfound islanders including Leonardo DiCaprio, Mark Wahlberg, Matt Damon, Anna Nicole Smith, Sir Sean Connery, Sir Roger Moore, Johnny Depp, "Desperate Housewives" star Teri Hatcher, Oprah Winfrey, Salma Hayek, Lenny Kravitz, among many others.

Ultimately, what makes the Bahamas so attractive is it is so accessible to Hollywood moviemakers. Known for its backdrop to many James Bond films beginning with "Thunderball" in 1965 to the film franchise's latest, "Casino Royale," starring new Bond star, Daniel Craig, the Bahamas has hosted over 50 Hollywood film productions. But it's James Bond who has brought the most attention to the island over the years with "Never Say Never Again," "You Only Live Twice," "The Spy Who Loved Me," and "For Your Eyes Only," which explains why both former Bond men, Connery and Moore, maintain residency there. "We live here, well, because it's really for our golf game," laughs Connery who can often be found hitting the links with his good friend.

Over the last two years alone, over 12 films set up shop in the Bahamas. Former Bond man, Pierce Brosnan and sexy Mexican star, Salma Hayek, could be seen around Nassau and Paradise Island as they filmed "After the Sunset." Both actors are now actively pursuing the purchase of homes here as well.

Johnny Depp, Kiera Knightley, and Orlando Bloom were fixtures on Grand Bahama Island and The Exumas with back-to-back production schedules of "The Pirates of the Caribbean" sequels. Rolling Stone Keith Richards was even said to have had one too many rum punches during a "wrap" cast party for his cameo appearance in the second sequel due out this July.

Jessica Alba had heads turning in Nassau in 2005 as she was constantly in bikinis of all cuts, mind-altering colors and styles for close to three months while she filmed "Into The Blue." And even the indie, "Open Water," was shot in the Bahamas. The film went on to win an Independent Spirit Award.

Academy Award winners Russell Crowe and Al Pacino were on the island in 1999 to film "The Insider," on the little known Bahaman island of Abaco.

Sir Anthony Hopkins had a Bahamian Bimini weekend as he had local residents a bit uneasy as he spent his time as Hannibal Lectur filming his closing scenes in "Silence of the Lambs." Hopkins notoriously stayed in character both on and off the set during filming. Bimini is another little known Bahaman island paradise.

Other classic films made on the island include The Beatles "HELP!", shot in 1965, "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea," in 1954, "Cocoon" in 1985, "Speed 2: Cruise Control" in 1997, and "Jaws: The Revenge."

But perhaps it was the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit issue that garnered the most attention in recent years as some of the most beautiful supermodels in the world spent 2005 AND 2006 doing countless photo shoots for what is, historically, the magazine's most sought-after issue every year. Paparazzis and tourists alike from all over could be seen trying to sneak access to the extremely hush-hush set.

The appeal of the Bahamas as a film location stems from many attributes including its close proximity to New York and Miami and a knowledgeable and helpful Film and Television Commission. Nassau is only a two and a half hour flight from New York and only 35 minutes from Miami. The Bahamas is also 55 miles closer to Los Angeles than Hawaii is.

Sir Sean Connery says that having Cage's support is a win-win for the Bahamas AND Hollywood. "Nic is a professional and brings to the table all the stuff that makes it a real joy," Connery said. Cage, who won a best-actor Oscar for 1995's "Leaving Las Vegas," also bought an undeveloped private island in the Exuma Cays late last year.



Sir Sean Connery and Nicolas Cage at the dinner at the Tribute