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Riding Herd on Movies

Film ranches cater to directors' evolving appetite for fresh locations in proximity to Hollywood.



Steve Arklin on set in Santa Clarita. Photo by Mike Baker

With film projects coming back to California and new productions starting up, movie ranches in the Valley region are busier than ever.

In Ventura County, there is Big Sky Movie Ranch in Simi Valley. The Antelope Valley has Four Aces and Club Ed, with their collection of diners, motel rooms and gas stations.

But it's in the Santa Clarita Valley where the biggest concentration of ranches is found. There are eight movie ranches located within the city boundaries, and in total, more than a dozen scattered throughout the Santa Clarita Valley. These include the Golden Oak Ranch, owned by Walt Disney Co. on nearly 900 acres along Placerita Canyon Road; Blue Cloud Movie Ranch; Melody Ranch Motion Picture Studio; Rancho Maria and Sable Ranch; and A Rancho Deluxe, on 250 acres just up the road from Golden Oak.

Last year, FilmL.A. counted 38,284 production days of location filming in the city of Los Angeles, unincorporated L.A. County and other jurisdictions. It was the second-highest total on record, with 2016 the highest with 39,627 shoot days. FilmL.A. President Paul Audley credited the state's production tax incentives for bringing out-of-state productions back to L.A. and for enticing new productions to remain here.

Evan Thomason, an economic development associate with the city of Santa Clarita, said the valley is attractive for the ranches due to open space, varied topography and proximity to Hollywood studios and soundstages.

“All these things feed each other,” Thomason said. “The movie ranches are a benefit to filming at one our soundstages and vice versa,” he added.



Mike Baker / A Rancho Deluxe set in Santa Clarita.



'Saving Mr. Banks' at Big Sky Ranch in Simi Valley.

Family-run ranches

Steve Arklin, manager at A Rancho Deluxe and son of its founder, said his father started out with about 5 acres some 30 years ago. Over the years, more and more land was added and it was suggested to the elder Arklin that he could operate it as a movie ranch. That was about 15 years ago, Arklin said, adding that only in the last 10 years has most serious film production taken place on the 250-acre spread.

When still in high school, Arklin had worked next door at the Sable Movie Ranch, and the skills he learned there transferred to Rancho Deluxe.

“By the time I was 18, I had some pretty good experience and that’s when my folks asked me to start doing it here,” Arklin said.

Most of the ranches are family-run businesses. At the Polsa Rosa Ranch, out on Soledad Canyon Road near Acton, a nearly 800-acre property nestled up against the Angeles National Forest, President Margie Vodraska works along with daughter Heather, husband Robert, and her sons Dustin Armstrong and Shane Armstrong.

“It’s a family thing,” Margie Vodraska said.

The most well-known family name associated with movie ranches in Santa Clarita is Veluzat. For more than 50 years, the Veluzats have been involved with multiple ranches in the valley and are now on the third generation of management.

Paul T. Veluzat, the patriarch, bought a ranch in Haskell Canyon that became a filming location in the mid-1960s. In 1990, his sons Andre and Renaud bought the Melody Ranch from cowboy actor Gene Autry, which had been used for westerns such as the classics “Gunsmoke” and “High Noon,” to more modern shows, like HBO series “Deadwood.” A third son, Rene, had owned Blue Cloud Movie Ranch, until selling it a few years ago to Dylan Lewis. Today, he and relative Marc Veluzat operate the Diamond V Movie Ranch.

Daniel Veluzat, Andre's son, is an owner of Melody Ranch Studio Backlot (formerly the Veluzat Motion Picture Ranch), a 240-acre facility that supplements the main studio property. With open space that provides roads, mesas, vistas and meadows, the backlot is where establishing shots, long horse runs and gunfights are filmed.

The property also contains a large Mexican town with a church, cantina, jail and hotel. Farther in the canyon is what is called "mid-American town," a 1950s village with a vintage gas station, diner and general store. Beyond that is a wooded area of pine forests with log cabins, farmhouses, barns and ranch buildings.

"We've done a lot of horror films there," Daniel Veluzat said of the forest area. "We did 'Friday the 13th Part III' in 3D there and multiple other horror films."

Cooperation for customers

With all the movie ranches located in Santa Clarita, it would seem natural that they compete for the production work. But that isn't the case.

"We all have something different so that makes it nice," said Polsa Rosa's Vodraska. "Everybody is good about working with each other in the canyon."

Arklin agreed on the spirit of cooperation among the ranches.

There was a situation recently where the nearby Sable ranch did not have enough parking, so vehicles were sent to Rancho Deluxe. Another time, it was just the opposite with Arklin sending vehicles to park at Sable, he said.

"If one is looking for a big villa, they will send them here," Arklin added. "If there is someone looking for big, green fields I'll send them down the street to Disney, where they have green fields all year. We work together and it's like one big team."

Daniel Veluzat said the ranches were good about keeping productions within the Santa Clarita Valley.

"(The reason) why the community does so well at the end of each business year is because the ranches are not necessarily in competition (with each other) but more so in competition to keep the business in the community," he said.

Alternative locations

Covering 9,000 acres, Big Sky Movie Ranch is one of the largest facilities for film and television production in the greater Los Angeles market.

Its rolling hills and grasslands in unincorporated Ventura County outside Simi Valley have appeared in "The Revenant," the Oscar-winning movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio; the Coen brothers feature "Hail, Caesar!"; and Quentin Tarantino's "Django Unchained." The landscape stood in for the Australian outback in "Saving Mr. Banks," about author P.L. Travers and her creation, Mary Poppins.

Jeff Morris, a location manager who manages and markets Big Sky for its owner, real estate developer Isaac Moradi, said that in February, there were photo shoots on the property for Louis Vitton, Calvin Klein and a spread in Elle magazine.

"We have a Wells Fargo commercial coming out with the Wells Fargo horses," Morris said.

Morris said that his property cannot compete with the Santa Clarita ranches.

For one, the incentives the city offers to production companies help in keeping costs down. The incentive program, established in 2009, refunds film permit fees and portions of hotel occupancy taxes to qualifying productions.

Another is that the Santa Clarita ranches have permanent sets that aren't found elsewhere.

But what Big Sky lacks in those other amenities, it makes up for with what Morris describes as some of the most beautiful natural scenery in the Los Angeles region.

"It is for the gorgeous landscapes that they come to our ranch," Morris said. "Some of it is so beautiful, you think you are in Montana."

Plenty of action

According to the ranch managers and owners, last year was a busy one all around for the movie ranches.

Rancho Deluxe hosted filming by the production crews for "Westworld," "The Orville" and "NCIS." Next door at Sable is a giant metal dragon used as a set for "Ultimate Beastmaster," a physical competition gameshow airing on Netflix. Polsa Rosa has also hosted "Westworld," as well as new Marvel series "Legion" and music videos for Blake Shelton and Lady Gaga.

The Melody Ranch backlot appears on the two seasons of "Westworld" and for music videos by Ariana Grande, Rhianna, Justin Timberlake and Gwen Stefani, Daniel Veluzat said.

"When we are not filming, we are constructing new sets, and grading roads, building interiors," he added. "There is always something to do."

While Veluzat and Rancho Deluxe's Arklin would not disclose how much their respective ranches rates are, Vodraska said that Polsa Rosa rates can start at \$3,000 and go up from there.

She also is willing to work with student filmmakers, such as a group from California State University – Northridge who came in February.

"A lot of people don't like to deal with the students, but we do. I think, Hey, they might make it big someday and come back," Vodraska said.

And when it comes to the celebrity actors and singers who are on the ranches, Vodraska said it can be hit or miss in terms of their friendliness.

Country star Shelton, who came to film a music video at Polsa Rosa, went around shaking hands and taking photos. DiCaprio, who filmed river scenes in "The Revenant" at the ranch, would only allow certain people on his set, Vodraska said.

"Same with Nicolas Cage when he did his movie – only certain people could be there," she added. "Some are cool, some aren't."