

On screen: Long Point's Final Close-Up

A planned resort on the Rancho Palos Verdes site will cost Hollywood a prime location that's been featured in numerous movies and TV shows.

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By Kate McLaughlin

If you see "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," which opens today, look closely. You might notice that parts of the Disney film look more like "Pirates of Palos Verdes."

Several of the film's key action scenes were shot at Long Point in Rancho Palos Verdes, site of the former Marineland of the Pacific.

For decades, the cliff-top spot has been one of the most strategic and convenient locations for Hollywood movie makers, who found the panoramic view and wide-open staging area ideal for large-scale projects.

Scenes from the first "Pirates" movie, "Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl," also were filmed there, as were scenes from the third "Pirates" movie, shot simultaneously with the current film, due for release in 2007.

But Long Point's star turn as a prime location is over: Shooting at the location officially has wrapped.

In a few months, construction of Terranea Resort is due to begin on the 102-acre seaside property, making the "Pirates" releases the last feature films to be shot at that location.

"For 'Pirates' 2, they built a church, a jail, a mountain and a bridge there," said Rancho Palos Verdes resident Jim York, who owned the Long Point property for 12 years before selling it to developers in November 2004. "We'll miss [Hollywood], but we've had a vision of a resort on that property for a long time. We're glad to have accomplished that."

In addition to building the big set pieces, "Pirates" filmmakers also shot action sequences at the location.

"We did a lot of effects shots and stunts at the site, like when they beach the [pirate ship] Black Pearl on an island inhabited by cannibals, and what follows is the exciting mayhem of capture, escape and chase," said William Ladd Skinner, art director for the three "Pirates" movies.

"Another great action scene is when Jack [Johnny Depp] and his crew are captured and put into a spherical cage made of bones, and dangled over a chasm. We had a 50-foot-by-100-foot set piece out on the cliff for that. And there's a great sword-fight action scene at a demolished church, which we shot there."

Since the earliest days of filming at Long Point, going back at least to the '60s, the spacious property has been considered ideal for accommodating dressing rooms and for parking fleets of trucks, with plenty of acreage left for caterers, cast and crew. Its commercial zoning made access quick and easy, requiring only a permit from the city.

Its tall cliffs and craggy coastline, atypical of most Southern California locations, were appropriate stand-ins for a quaint Mediterranean village or a windswept Northern California locale. Using the terraced hillsides as a backdrop, the place could also double as a slice of suburbia.

Other feature films shot at Long Point include "The Rock," "Charlie's Angels," "50 First Dates," "Hidalgo," "The Aviator," "Pearl Harbor," "Van Helsing" and "Fun With Dick and Jane."

Television productions that took advantage of Long Point's attributes include "Six Feet Under," "Fear Factor" and "The Division." Commercials for Diet Coke, Siemens Corp., Asahi Beer and Weight Watchers International also were shot there.

Twentieth Century Fox filmed the 2001 feature "Life as a House" on the property. Palos Verdes Estates resident Curtis Collins, a longtime location manager, said the value of the place as a filming location was not lost on those in the know.

"I've never shot at that location, unfortunately," Collins said. "It would have been nice to drive five minutes to work. But a friend of mine was the production designer on 'Life as a House,' and he tried to get Fox to buy that property. There's nowhere else in the zone that offers that view with that height and all that room. For its particular offerings, there's nowhere else like it."

The studio "zone" Collins referred to is a 30-mile radius established as part of a deal between film industry labor unions and producers to define certain travel-expense boundaries. Though Long Point's location within the zone made it attractive for filmmakers, it was the spectacular seaside cliffs that made the site one of a kind.

"You get a nice, open-horizon backdrop while you're still on land," said Skinner, who also worked as art director for "Pearl Harbor," which shot at Long Point. "[For 'Pirates'] we built a ship on land, and it looked like it was in the water. We did the same thing for 'Pearl Harbor.' We gimbaled all the airplanes on the edge of the cliff, and it looked like they were flying over the open ocean. Losing that site is the end of an era."

It also will exacerbate the ongoing problem of runaway production.

For years, California has been losing much of its film production to Canada, and other states in the U.S., as filmmakers are lured by huge incentives that California hasn't matched.

"It was a big coup for us to get a large chunk of filming 'Pirates' to stay here in California," said Amy Lemisch, director of the California Film Commission. "Without that location, it's possible that a big chunk of work might have gone away, and we would have lost a big job. We're facing an uphill battle with competition outside the state."

Although most episodic television is still shot in Los Angeles, Lemisch said, production for the TV movie-of-the-week is gone, as is a lot of feature filming. Louisiana is leading the pack of 28 other states with film incentives that are attracting filmmakers to shoot there instead of here.

Based on its projections to date, the film commission anticipates a decline this year in feature film production in California.

"I was in a meeting this morning for a film I'm working on, and Baltimore is pushing hard for us to shoot there," Collins said last week. "There's a lot less filming here than there was even five or 10 years ago.

"The same kind of thing happened downtown," he said. "For a long time, it was a ghost town down there after 5 o'clock, and we could do whatever we wanted. But with the [development of lofts], now it's like going into any residential area.

"It'll make our job a little harder now that [Long Point] is no longer available," said Collins. "But we'll just have to move on."