

Lessons for production crews filming in Africa

Production crews need to plan when shooting in more remote areas of the continent, or they may find themselves dealing with goat 'location fees', an audience of belligerent baboons and unseasonal rain in the desert.



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In addition to the unpredictability of the environment, facilities are often very basic which means you have to plan carefully before you leave to ensure you're taking whatever you need along.

"A key challenge when planning for a shoot in Africa is that you have to be very specific about what you are going to take along because there's often very little equipment at your final destination. Places like Kenya and Nigeria have good infrastructure, but in remote places there's no chance of renting equipment that you've left behind," said Margie McMahon, a South African-based line producer aka "fixer" who specialises in filming across Africa, from Angola to Morocco, Ethiopia to Madagascar.

Despite intricate planning and managing client expectations, there will still be those who are unprepared for the harsh realities of filming in Africa. Said Brin Kushner, executive producer AFS Productions: "We have had some very challenging shoots where clients, no matter how much you warn them, are not prepared for how rudimentary certain areas of Africa can be."

For international producers, the reality that Africa is a very diverse place also has to sink in, and, that to film 'Africa' for

Africa – including the many elements that audiences perceive to be idiosyncratic to Africa – is only possible in certain destinations like Tanzania and Kenya, for example.

“Currently, destinations like Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana and Uganda are very popular film locations. They are quite easy to film in, offer good resources for crews and are multi-faceted. Of course, it also depends on what the content is as the shoot may have location requirements that entail filming at a specific landmark within a destination,” explained McMahon.

Fixers needed

With each destination comes varied filming requirements, says Stage and Screen’s Jennifer Smith, who specialises in entertainment travel. “You should allow for enough time to arrange your carnet, visa’s, filming permits and even be aware of the time it may take for your overseas shipments to clear customs. We have key fixers and agents in targetted countries to ensure our clients are well prepared.”

That preparation includes organising travel to far-flung locations where airlift is infrequent and unreliable, said Smith. “Travel networks across Africa can be erratic – ports are closed, flights are delayed and cancelled at not even a moment’s notice and without regular schedules that means a crew, or your equipment, could be stranded sometimes for several days on end.

There is only so much proactive forward preparation one can do in these cases, but it helps when you have someone with experience in African travel on the ground to remove the stress from rescheduling onward travel, tracking lost luggage, expediting excess baggage check-ins and sorting out immediate travel requirements so that the crew’s needs are catered for completely, your equipment is delivered timeously and there’s peace of mind.

McMahon recounted a situation where a crew arrived in Nairobi in transit only to find that their gear had been left behind. With few onward flights to their final destination, they were delayed by a day and had to make alternate plans. “You have to try to make provision for things that are out of your control, like checking at each leg that your luggage is actually on the flight.”

For crews, luggage is a key consideration when travelling across Africa, added Smith. Not just in terms of its safety, but also the ability to transport large quantities and weights. “Airlines have different rules when it comes to how much luggage (even excess) can be carried and it is also important for crews to understand that specific countries have customs requirements when it comes to film equipment.

“That is why it’s essential to rely on an agency that specialises in the specific requirements of the TV and film industry when you’re travelling into Africa. You need to be able to calculate how much excess baggage you have, and if it’s more than an aircraft can carry you need to allocate more time for the next half of the load to go on the next flight. “

Like with most things in Africa, it pays to be connected and have the global partnerships to help navigate the red tape and unpredictable environment. “Having an on-the-ground understanding of each country’s peculiarities requires a strong network of partners within each destination,” confirmed Smith.