

A photograph of a white, weathered stone wall with a window and a cactus in the foreground. The wall is made of rough-hewn stones and has a small window with dark shutters. A cactus with yellow flowers is in the foreground on the left. The sky is clear and blue.

ONCE UPON

A TIME IN

ALMERIA

MORE THAN 600 SPAGHETTI WESTERNS WERE SHOT IN THE ARID LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUTHEASTERN SPANISH PROVINCE OF ALMERIA IN THE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S. GEOFF BROKATE VISITED THE TABERNAS DESERT, WHERE HE CAPTURED THIS SELECTION OF SPECTACULAR IMAGES OF THE MANY SETS STILL STANDING

For a decade during the mid-1960s, hidden away in the southeastern Spanish province of Almeria were the stirrings of a cinematic resurrection. Among the hot desert winds of the eroded badlands, a band of European filmmakers flocked to the Tabernas Desert, making it home to the Spaghetti Western. Its semiarid landscape emulated the American Arizona Desert and the northern Mexican border where the films' scenarios were set.

The success of the genre that became known as the Spaghetti Western rode on its audacity to show violence in a way that cinemagoers weren't used to. It was exciting, raw and dangerous. It was as the Wild West was meant to be: where characters had unlimited bullets, no morals and lived in a lawless land. A place where even the good guys were bad.

At a time when American audiences had turned towards television, the Western film genre had experienced a steady decline in cinemas. In 1964 Italian director Sergio Leone, now a cult figure who has inspired lauded directors such as Quentin Tarantino, paid a young unknown named Clint Eastwood US\$15,000 to make the first of a trilogy of films that have now become ingrained in cinematic history. They oozed style, swaggering along to the rhythm of Ennio Morricone's soundtracks. His haunting use of a solo whistle is now a cliché, synonymous with lone gunmen in a final ruthless shootout.

Based on the success of his first film, *A Fistful of Dollars*, Leone now sought to build permanent sets for his second film, *A Few Dollars More*. This resulted in the creation of the Texas Hollywood and Western Leone film sets. Two styles of architecture were used, that of the American West with wooden structures, saloons and banks. Alongside these were Mexican pueblos made from adobe mud with open plazas and churches. These sets became the base for a caravan of European production companies as they flooded the Spanish desert in an attempt to emulate the success of Leone's films. None were to ever achieve such heights; with more than 600 Westerns made around Almeria, Leone's were the only films to be a box office success in America.

American critics, inspired by the Japanese term for the films being produced by Leone and others, Macaroni Western, coined Spaghetti Western. While the name pointed to the fact that most of the European Westerns were being funded by Italian money, it was also intended with a dose of ridicule. The critics were often sceptical of the genre. They saw their own history and stories being hijacked by foreign productions that were made quickly and cheaply. With notoriously small budgets, production values suffered, the dialogue was out of sync and stories were often poorly edited and difficult to follow.

In 1965, 20-year-old Dan van Husen saw his first Spaghetti Western in a cinema in Stockholm. It was Leone's second film, and he could never have known that four years later he would go on and begin an acting career in the Tabernas Desert. Van Husen made 24 films in a seven-year period, and is the only Spaghetti Western actor aside from Clint Eastwood still working. "Nobody at the time felt that there was anything unique about what we were doing," he says.

Young and enthusiastic, van Husen was immune to the disorganisation that surrounded the productions. "There was enough to keep the actors happy, enough food and water, we stayed at the best hotel in Almeria," he says. "After shooting we went into the bar, we never changed our clothes. Our drivers knew our room numbers, they came up and woke us up and we had to jump into our dirty clothes. A very good life.

"Most of those Westerns I did with the Italians, I never saw a script. Apart from the director, cameraman and the leading actors nobody had a script."

Van Husen recalls the unorthodox methods used by directors who had to overcome language barriers in order to meet shooting schedules. "There were films where you had Spanish, Italian and German actors. As they were co-productions each actor just spoke in their own language. We just about managed to understand each other. The director would say, 'You count to ten and act very angry.' And then he would point to the other actor and say, 'You answer by counting to ten very softly and quietly.'"

The actors would film the scene counting in their own language and they would be overdubbed with the actual dialogue in post-production – a method that resulted in poor dialogue sync, which wasn't a problem for van Husen. "I thought acting was fabulous, I had to sit on a horse and count. That was my job," he says.

By 1975 the reign of the European Western had subsided, the scripts had become limp and were resorting to comedy. The latter films lacked the energy and tenacity of the early Leone films. Van Husen laments, "People lost interest when it became funny. The comedy aspect finished the Spaghetti Western. Sometimes I regret that I wasn't born three years earlier. I would have liked to have been in one of Leone's films."

It is a sentiment that resonates today in the Tabernas Desert. The old film sets that remain form a shadow of their glory days, where Henry Fonda once sat in the saloon playing poker or Jul Brenner rode his horse through the sandy valleys. Now owned by a local family and open to visitors, the locations still hold the romance of the Wild West. Despite being only 30km from Almeria, the sets feel remote and rugged and there is a scent of that freedom that Leone's pioneering films dared to explore.



If you're in the mood to watch a Western, then head to Film Club on ice digital widescreen for more than 50 classic movies, including westerns *Rio Bravo*, *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid* and *The Gunfighter*.







