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GARDEN OF THE GODS

■ A film by Michael Schlamberger

Imagine a world where everything in nature, from the landscapes and oceans to the weather and the animals, reflected the wilful activities of a pantheon of powerful gods. Where every plant, every animal, every geological feature had a story that linked it directly to the supernatural. Once upon a time, for a brief shining moment, such a place existed. This was Ancient Greece. A world of fascinating wildlife. This was the Garden of the Gods.

This film takes an extraordinary journey across the beautiful natural world of Greece, into the stories of the Gods who once presided here, and featuring the animals that inspired them.

Legend has it, that Poseidon, God of the sea, split mountains with his trident and tossed them into the sea. But the geological drama began over 10 million years ago when two tectonic plates collided. The African plate drifted towards Europe compressing the ancient sea bed of the Thetys and folding up new mountain ranges. The European plate was pushed underneath and from the sunken mountain ranges only the peaks remain visible: the Aegean islands. From then on earthquakes and volcanic eruptions continued to shape Greece.

Today Greece is characterized mainly by mountains and sea. Bays and rocky inlets penetrate deep into the mainland and together with 10.000 islands they form a rugged coastline of more than 15.000 Kilometres - as long as of the whole continent of Africa. And this geological process is still continuing.

The landmass of Greece is hit by earth tremors 20 times a day as it drifts closer to Africa at a rate of 4 centimetres a year.



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The Aegean epitomises Greece: a huge area of warm sea liberally scattered with hundreds of islands of all shapes and sizes. It is a crossroad for fauna from three different seas: the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. The Aegean is also home of the legendary seafarers of the ancients. This is the realm of Poseidon, Lord of the Sea: unpredictable and brutal. Amongst the oldest seafarers in the Mediterranean are the sea turtles.

The loggerhead turtles spend most of their life at sea, often roaming over long distances. Despite their maritime lifestyle, they retain their link with the land during the breeding season. For thousands of years they have emerged on summer nights from their watery kingdom to lay their eggs on the beaches in Greece.

Greece is a place of astonishing diversity with seven of the most varied and extreme habitats of any country in Europe, ranging from the marine world to freshwater wetlands, alpine meadows to underground grottos. This is a country of contrasts, of thousands of islands scattered across the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean, and a mainland where snow-capped mountains tower over green valleys. Such rich habitat support a stunning variety of wildlife: wolves and owls in the forests, dolphins and turtles in the sea, scorpions and vipers in the dry scrubland, even blind rodents underground.

Shooting a film in Greece is a challenge as there are so many habitats sharing a relatively small space and an enormous diversity of plant and animal species. High mountains and deep blue sea, desert-like areas and endless meadows carpeted with colourful flowers are often only a few kilometres apart.



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The disadvantage of this changing topography is that if you want to shoot extraordinarily spectacular scenes using cranes and other specialised equipment – a hallmark of ScienceVision productions – you must be prepared to face unexpected transport challenges. It took four fully loaded donkeys to shoot a crane view over the edge of the Samaria Gorge in Crete. And that's not even counting our two-legged donkeys. Many areas are accessible only by using alpine skis. For instance, filming on Mount Olympus in winter would not have been possible without the support of the Greek army. Ironically, in some other places the team ran into exactly the opposite problem – these were all too accessible.

Cameraman Rolando Menardi explains: "We knew that it would be extremely difficult to film the sunset on Poseidon's temple at Cap Sounion without tourists." The temple, bathed in the golden light of evening, is one of the most spectacular scenes to be found anywhere in Greece, so the site attracts countless visitors. "Our team did its best to prevent people from constantly running into the picture. Amazingly, we managed to do that for just a few precious seconds." Amidst the remains of ancient Greek civilisation the film crew discovered a natural world that still holds many mysteries.

They even managed to shoot in the secret bays and on the beaches where loggerhead turtles mate and excavate nests for their eggs. "We were immensely lucky when the baby turtles hatched", director Michael Schlamberger comments. "Usually most of them hatch at night, but of course it is impossible to film them at night because these beaches are rigorously protected.



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Putting up spotlights is simply not an option – this would totally confuse the little turtles. But when we were there, the hatchlings waited conveniently until the scene was gloriously lit by the first light of dawn.” Lucky coincidence and presence of mind were also instrumental in capturing on film one of the most spectacular scenes of this documentary. On the slopes of Mount Olympus above the tree line, the film team witnessed a most unusual confrontation: griffon vultures had just begun to feast on a carcass surrounded by a group of protesting ravens. Suddenly, a wolf appeared out of nowhere and frightened off the vultures to snatch the carcass.

“To my knowledge, such a bizarre encounter has never before been filmed in Europe”, reports a happy Schlamberger. Finding one of the world’s smallest giant snakes was also an extremely difficult task. However, the team was rewarded handsomely for its efforts when it succeeded in filming, for the first time, the only European relative of the famous pythons and boas. The team had to get very close to this “giant snake”. Ironically, the sand boa measures just a modest 40 centimetres.

"Garden of the Gods"

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