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Return to Those Thrilling Days of ‘Gunga Din’

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LONE PINE, Calif. —

Never been to India? Always wanted to see the Khyber Pass? You can get the next best thing on a weekend visit to this scenic Sierra locale.

In the sweeping valley just west of here, amid the rocky jumbles of the Alabama Hills, such Hollywood epics as “Gunga Din,” “Charge of the Light Brigade” and “Lives of a Bengal Lancer” were filmed, all serving as an amazing look-alike of the Northern India frontier.

You don’t have to be a mature traveler to enjoy the area, but it helps, especially if you’re a movie buff of those early action adventure films. So buckle on your swash and drive north five hours to see where Cary Grant, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Victor McLaglen, Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper and others cavorted in the shadows of the Sierra Nevada.

Having seen “Gunga Din” almost 50 times since its 1939 release, I knew this sort of a pilgrimage was for me. One giveaway map notes Gunga Din Circle off Horseshoe Meadows Road, where director George Stevens shot some of the climactic battle scenes. I spent a few happy hours there reliving the film.

Follow the Movie Road

Later, searching for other locations used in the film, I followed the aptly named Movie Road, meandering through the Alabama Hills, and suddenly there it was--the sweeping vista with a mountain backdrop and dusty road arching off to the right.

There was the site of Stevens’ greatest shots: the entire battalion of British “Scotties” and Indian troops marching to rescue Grant, Fairbanks and McLaglen, but heading into an ambush until old Gunga Din (Sam Jaffe) saved the day. I had a lump in my throat and could have sworn I heard the kilted bagpipers playing the old marching song, “Bonnie Charlie’s Gang Awa’.”

That was enough to make the entire weekend for me, but I was delighted to find a host of other things to see and do, along with the majestic scenery and movie memories.

Driving along Whitney Portal Road, which leads directly to the base of the continental United States’ highest peak, I noticed a dilapidated old sign, “Cuffe Guest Ranch of Movie Fame.” Intrigued, I turned in.



Once through the gate I ducked under the cottonwood trees and there, set around the sparkling, rushing waters of Lone Pine Creek, was the ranch. Though it has seen better days, the ranch has a rich history, having once been the hideaway haven for many Hollywood stars of the 1930s, '40s and '50s; it was also used as a set for several films and base camp for many others.

Still heading the operation is a sweet, sometimes feisty octogenarian named Irene Cuffe, whose own show business past includes vaudeville, early radio, TV and movies. She's a story in herself.

The ranch was opened in 1925 by Clarence Badger, Hollywood pioneer and director of such films as "No, No Nanette," "Miss Brewster's Millions" and "The Rainmaker." During his ownership the ranch was a retreat for such stars as Mabel Normand, Lila Lee, Douglas Fairbanks Sr., Joan Blondell and George Brent.



Clarence Badger and Clara Bow

"They'd come here just for the escape, or to do some trout fishing," Cuffe said, "sometimes a bunch at a time. And when there was filming nearby, they'd all stay here and have big parties.

"They made millionaires of the folks who owned the drugstore in Lone Pine because that was the only place for miles to buy liquor."

Then she told me something that almost broke my heart. "After they were done filming 'Gunga Din' (the set was right down the road), they left most of the sets on our property. They were there for years . . . but then we just got rid of them. I'm sorry now we did that."

So was I, as just a brick or wooded slat would have been like a holy relic for me.



Irene and Lesley Cuffe

Irene Cuffe and her husband, Lesley E. Cuffe, who was associated with Paramount Studios and also worked closely with Cecil B. DeMille, bought the ranch in 1943 and continued catering to Hollywood.

"Gene Autry used the ranch as his headquarters for many of the Westerns he filmed around here," said Cuffe. "He used to have his name painted high on the rocks up there . . . but it's all worn off now."

The last major film shot at the ranch was "I Died a Thousand Times" in 1955, with Shelley Winters, Jack Palance and Lee Marvin. It was a remake of the Humphrey Bogart/Ida Lupino movie, "High Sierra."

"That Lee Marvin," Cuffe said, "he just loved to fish here."

Before Lesley E. Cuffe's death in 1949 the Cuffes operated theaters in Palm Springs, Lake Arrowhead and on Catalina Island. Irene, whose stage name was **Irene Powell**, appeared in some of the shows. Her brochure still notes that she "made a hit in

the musical 'Catch My Soul' at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles." She was known professionally as "the actress of 1,000 faces."

Cuffe has operated the 160-acre ranch on her own since 1949, and still considers herself active in films, but more in "the production end these days."

She still accepts guests at the ranch, but in all honesty, accommodations haven't changed much since the early glory days. One could describe the cabins as having a rustic charm and filled with antiques. One could also call them old and spare. Still, the setting is superb, and what great memories they invoke.

Rooms in the historic lodge, with its stonework and redwood timbers, are more appealing; it was there that the biggest stars stayed, including Winters, Palance and Marvin.

Rates for either cabins or the lodge begin at \$55 a night for two. The fishing, says Cuffe, is just as good as it was years ago, maybe better.

Lone Pine, which is just down the road, also has the 56-room Best Western Frontier and 39-room Dow Villa, both of which provide senior rates. Regular rates begin at about \$36 to \$38 a night, double occupancy.

Just a few miles north of Lone Pine along U.S. 395 is the Manzanar Relocation Center, where 10,000 Japanese-Americans were interned during World War II. Only some barbed wire and guard buildings remain, along with walkways and the steps from old tar-paper buildings.

Three Minor Attractions

Across U.S. 395 is the mostly dirt Manzanar-Reward Road, which, for the adventure-minded, provides three minor attractions in a 10-minute drive. For starters you find yourself driving over a weed-covered airstrip from an abandoned World War II Air Force Base, then across the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which from there carries water for 200 miles to Los Angeles, including more than 40 miles of mountain tunnels.

The road ends at the one-time mining town of Reward. You can still see the old mine at the mountainside where a young Herbert Hoover was an early superintendent.

For more information: Cuffe Guest Ranch, P.O. Box 153, Lone Pine, Calif. 93545; (619) 876-4161.

You can contact the Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce at 126 S. Main St., Lone Pine, Calif. 93545; (619) 876-4444.