



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

Gunga Din (1939)

RKO Pictures



Gunga Din is a 1939 RKO adventure film directed by George Stevens and starring Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. The film is about three British sergeants and Gunga Din, their native bhisti (water bearer), who fight the Thuggee, a cult of murderous Indians in colonial British India.

Gunga Din (Although "Din" is frequently pronounced to rhyme with "pin", the rhymes within the poem make it clear that it should be pronounced /'din/ to rhyme with "green".) transports us to a romanticized era during the British Empire. It was inspired by the 1892 poem by Rudyard Kipling.

Filming began in June of 1938 and was set to last for 64 days. Due to the working methods of director Stevens and to a studio (RKO) anxious to produce its most prestigious picture to date, *Gunga Din*, shot here in Lone Pine, would ultimately go over budget, miss its release date of Christmas, 1938, and the shooting schedule would stretch well beyond the allotted 64 days to a total of 104 days, almost twice what most pictures took at the time. The movie would become the most expensive movie RKO ever made up until that time with a budget over 1.9 million.

The three principals Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen, and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. play three soldiers hell-bent on making the world safe. Together, they are the three musketeers of Her Majesty's Army. Each conveys a boy's enthusiasm for adventure. That, and the genuine friendship among them, is at the heart of the movie.

When an English cavalry patrol at Tantapur, India, gets wiped out, Sergeants Cutter (Grant), MacChesney (McLaglen), and Ballantine (Fairbanks, Jr.) ride in and fight a murderous cult of Thuggees. Gunga Din (Sam Jaffe) is the company water-bearer who dreams of being a soldier but must always follow behind. When treasure-hunting Cutter goes off in search of a golden temple, he and Gunga Din stumble into the meeting place of the Thuggees and their sinister Guru (Eduardo Ciannelli). Din escapes and brings word to the other sergeants, who must come to Cutter's rescue.



The production company created huge sets and the compliment of actors, crew, extras, technicians, horses, elephants, and trainers was huge - the largest company sent on location in Hollywood history up to that time. (And the largest production ever filmed in the Lone Pine area) The largest set was that built for the Tantapur village, several blocks of complex structures and rooftops. A tent city to house the cast and crew was built off movie road. About six miles from that location, in a flatter desert terrain, an Army encampment for the British troops was constructed.

At a third location, the Thuggee Temple was built. The film is recognized as one of the rare films of its era to stand up well to modern sensitivities.



Accidents are possible on the set of any action film, and during his live question-and-answer tour in the 1980s, Cary Grant related a particular incident from the filming; "Victor McLaglen hit me so hard in a scene we were shooting for ***Gunga Din*** that he knocked me out cold. I meant to miss his fist, but my timing was off; instead of moving back, I went right into it. He carried me off the set over his shoulder, not even knowing that he had knocked me out. He could have killed me. When I came to, I chased after him with a bottle. It was lucky I didn't catch him."

Although the film was over budget in shooting days, Berman sent the company back to location for two weeks in October, 1938 to create the spectacular finale as the British defeat the Thuggee Cult fighters. This sequence employed 1500 men along with horses, mules, and elephants. Great care was taken with the choreography of the ensuing confusion as the Thuggees attempted to ambush the British.

Gunga Din was shot by Joseph August. He was the perfect choice to photograph the outdoors picture that Stevens had wanted. August shows off the landscape to such great advantage – using California's Mt. Whitney as a substitute for the Khyber Pass. Many Hollywood films that were set in exotic parts of Asia were shot in Lone Pine – 225 miles northeast of Los Angeles. But few were as carefully photographed as ***Gunga Din*** with its natural lighting and well-suited locations.

The film premiered in Los Angeles on January 24, 1939, and in New York City two days later. The movie went into general release on February 17th. Box office was very good, but because the final negative cost of the film was an astonishing \$1,909,000, ***Gunga Din*** did not see a profit in its first year of release.

Few films, then or now, have been able to match ***Gunga Din's*** combination of humor, derring-do, and humanity. It's a boy's adventure about heroics that takes us back to our youth and rekindles old enthusiasms. It's the sort of mythic dream that Hollywood excelled at in its golden age. ***Gunga Din's*** lasting influence can be seen decades later in 1984's Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, which lifted many plot points from the earlier film.



The Museum's exhibit has a number of production pictures, lobby cards, bullet casing s and a few wooden swords, machete and movie posters from the movie. There are also a few pieces of the plaster that was used in building Thuggee Temple. While there are a number of pictures of the temple, all of the structures were demolished after the picture. If one goes to the movie sites, you can see iron pins and in some cases, plaster remnants in and on the grounds.

A picture of the bridge as it was shot and as seen in the movies over chasm is below. The final, matted, version looks quite dramatic.

