

# A GOOD TIME FOR THAILAND

WHEN YOU ADD FRESH NEW INCENTIVES TO THAILAND'S BEAUTY, WARMTH AND CUISINE, IT BECOMES AN ALMOST IRRESISTIBLE LOCATION FOR FILM & TV PRODUCTION.

WRITTEN BY ROBERT BAKER

Thailand is known the world over as “the land of smiles,” and with good reason. Its legendary hospitality, inviting beaches, and unparalleled beauty has made it a destination for tourists, adventurers, and, of course, film producers. Who wouldn't want to film in the land of smiles?

Producers have long understood Thailand's unique charms. A long list of distinguished films have been shot on location in Thailand, from *The Deer*

*Hunter* (1978) to *The Killing Fields* (1984) to *The Beach* (2000) to *Da Five Bloods* (2020). And production is ramping up. U.S. companies spent \$90 million shooting 34 productions in Thailand in 2023, out of a total of 466 foreign productions from over 40 countries.

“It is always exciting to see independent producers looking to produce in Asia,” says Susan Lee, senior regional director for production and trade policy for the Motion Picture Association, Asia

Pacific Headquarters. “It is a good time to be thinking about Thailand.”

## DID SOMEONE SAY INCENTIVE?

Thailand's long film history notwithstanding, the Thai government did not offer substantial incentives to producers until 2017. Under that scheme, producers received a 15% rebate on all eligible local expenditures and could receive an additional 5% if they met certain criteria. It was a step in the right direction.



Filming *The Creator* on location in Thailand.

COURTESY OF OREN SOFFER, 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

“Since Thailand launched the incentive program in 2017, we have worked to get them up to speed on how international producers decide where they want to shoot,” says Lee. “Incentives are a big part of it.”

Thailand faces big competition from neighboring countries that have offered much larger incentives, usually in the form of rebates. So it was welcome news when the Thai cabinet approved a plan to increase rebates to 30% starting in 2024, capped at 150,000,000 baht (roughly \$4.2 million). This came on the heels of Thailand’s announcement that it would waive personal income taxes collected on foreign talent working in the country.

“The Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THCCA) is a new organization with a mission to promote the creative industries in Thailand,” says Wannasiri Morakul, chair of the International Film and Video Licensing Board in the Thai Film Office (TFO). THCCA will represent and advocate on behalf of creative fields like literature, food, music and dance, and film. One of its prime objectives is to make the rebate incentives permanent.

It is all part of what the Thai government has billed as its new focus on “soft power,” broadly defined as promoting Thai culture—food, music, martial arts and film. Lee hopes it will come through. “There is an anticipation that they will be able, hopefully, to raise the subsidies permanently to 30%.”

### GET A LOCAL COORDINATOR

On one point, there can be no debate—a local coordinator is essential. Film permits can only be obtained from local coordinators licensed by the Thai Film Office. TFO keeps an up-to-date list of coordinators and is happy to share, although they will not advocate one over another.

“Knowing the right people on the

ground is key,” says Nicholas Simon, owner of Indochina Productions, a production company based in Bangkok. Local coordinators do everything from location scouting to finding local production crews to navigating tricky situations.

“Misunderstandings and miscommunications between international film producers and Thai crew can happen,” says Morakul. “The way to avoid this is to make sure you work with a licensed local coordinator. They are trained and experienced, and they all have the service mindset.”

Ron Schmidt was executive producer on HBO’s show *The Sympathizer* (2024), filmed on location in Thailand. He emphasized how important it was to have a local production service company that worked closely with government officials in all the different regions where they shot.

“We wanted everyone to know it was a privilege to work in their country and in their home and that we would embrace their culture, people and crew with respect and kindness,” says Schmidt. “We worked closely together with government officials to have a solid production plan, and I’m happy to report that we were able to avoid any major issues.”

### DON’T OVERLOOK LOCAL TALENT

“A lot of people talk about the rebates, and some countries give higher rebates,” says Chalermchatri “Adam” Yukol, a Thai producer who also sits on the government-appointed soft power committee. “But what makes Thailand a great destination is its great film ecosystem.”

Thailand has been a site for film production long enough to have nurtured excellent human resources. Most of the studios, crew and actors are based in Bangkok, where decades of filming have helped to build the necessary knowledge base for skilled

services and personnel.

“If you work as crew on an international production, and you are good, you tend to be called back to work again,” says Lee. “Thai crews have earned that reputation.”

They certainly have. Producers regularly report that the local crews are strong, in terms of both work ethic and skill sets. Favorable exchange rates mean that local crews are also relatively inexpensive, a good mark for the bottom line of productions. Hiring Thai crews also helps activate certain rebates, making it a double bonus.

“We always had the intention of employing local Thai crew in senior positions on the movie, and we ended finding not only an exceptional production team, but also our production designer, costume designer, key grip, and gaffer in Thailand, all of whom were excellent,” says James Spencer, a producer on *The Creator* (2023), shot on location in Thailand. “Overall, the Thai crew were phenomenal. They worked unbelievably hard and were a total pleasure to collaborate with.”

When asked how to stretch budgets, Schmidt bluntly advises to hire more Thai crew members. “I consistently got the same message from producers who shot there before me,” says Schmidt. “They wished they had hired more Thai crew, because they were just as talented and experienced as the foreign crew that were brought in.”

Thai crew are talented and efficient and notably warm. Producers regularly talk about how much they have cherished their experience with their crews, from the smiles to the positive body language to the genuine kindness.

Schmidt recounts the story of the crew finding an injured puppy at one of their location shoots. The puppy was suspicious but stayed close by. The crew (both Thai and American) left food and water for him until they had gained his

EP Susan Downey, star/EP Robert Downey Jr., and showrunner Don McKellar on the set of *The Sympathizer* in Thailand.



Camera operator Rittikorn Manonom, EP Nicholas Simon, production manager Nathacharleeya Seupsaengsulwan, and line producer Atchariya Pinitanpirom on set in Bangkok.



trust. They all pitched in to cover the costs of surgery on the puppy's wounded leg, as well as a year's worth of food and toys. After the shoot was over, one of the Thai crew members adopted the dog and brought him back to Bangkok.

The only downside to having talented, efficient and genuinely kind crews is that they will attract more and more producers to film in Thailand, and this may strain resources.

"If they get the incentives to 30%, there will be a much bigger demand for resources, crew and facilities," says Lee. "And if that happens, Thailand will have to work on increasing its crew base to keep up with demand. It will certainly be essential for producers to plan ahead."

### INFRASTRUCTURE RISING

Assuming production ramps up in 2024 and 2025, the strain on resources may be most pronounced with soundstages and film studios. Thailand's current studio infrastructure is mighty but small.

"There are soundstages in Bangkok, which were definitely serviceable, but maybe not to the degree where I would take an entirely stage-based movie to Bangkok," says James Spencer. "Having said that, they were great for a few days and perfect in terms of staging the handful of pickups we needed at the end of the shoot."

Producers we spoke with rarely mentioned relying on the Bangkok studios, and a few spoke openly about the need for more infrastructure. "We don't have enough studios," says Chidchanok "Pam" Plodripu, a line producer on *The Creator*. "We have wonderful locations, hidden gems, everything, but we need more studios as well."

Studio construction is not something that will happen overnight. Nonetheless, it represents an opportunity. "The Thai government is looking for private partnerships to help build up those services," says Lee. "They would welcome the exchange of expertise and the investment."

### DIVERSITY, DIVERSITY, DIVERSITY

Thailand is one place where the phrase "unparalleled beauty" does not feel like an exaggeration. The vigorous forests, dramatic mountains and inviting beaches offer filmmakers a lush palette for creating any kind of mood.

"*The Creator* was a location-driven movie, and we shot on 75 locations as far north, east, south and west as you can go," says Spencer. Logistics on that shoot were complex, as cast and crew traveled more than 4,500 miles by the end of shooting. "I would definitely advise having a plan and sticking to it. In terms of securing locations, the police were always helpful, and you require very little security in Thailand, even when shooting in Bangkok."

And if Thailand's beaches are famously picturesque, wait until you find the hidden gems.

"We filmed in a location that features this massive rock formation that looks almost too monumental to be real," says

Susan Downey, executive producer of *The Sympathizer*. “Since it is tucked away from a main road and totally unexpected, it takes your breath away when you finally come upon it.”

The urban landscape can be just as varied. “Large city settings like Bangkok and Phuket are incredibly different,” Downey adds. “Bangkok is an expansive, nonstop metropolitan area and Phuket is more of a bustling, beachside city.”

Downey notes the country’s great variety of time periods represented in local infrastructure and architecture, which enabled their production to find everything they required, including a French colonial estate, a spot that doubled for a riverbank in Laos and a stand-in for an airport tarmac in Saigon.

Thailand’s relatively small size means that it is possible to shoot in a city and then move to a rural location the next day. When combined with the country’s famous penchant for hospitality, this can make shooting run even smoother. Hotels abound, the food is amazing, and shooting in many locations is possible.

“I think it is actually easier to film in more remote areas, perhaps even easier than filming in busier places like Bangkok,” says Yukol. “It can seem harder to be in remote locations, but just work with the Thailand Film Office and local coordinators.”

As with its varied infrastructure, Thailand’s variety of landscapes and settings allows for significant cost savings. “We were able to use settings in Thailand to double for locations in India, Bangladesh, Australia and Hawaii,” says Simon.

But don’t film in Thailand just to save money. Go because of the breathtaking scenery, the varied landscape, the famous hospitality, and above all else, the smiles.

“We want Thailand to be producers’ first choice,” says Morakul. ■

## A PRO’S CHECKLIST

Producer Nicholas Simon has been living and working in Thailand since the mid-’90s, and formed his Bangkok-based production company Indochina Productions in 2010. Simon has amassed a breadth of experience in producing series and feature films in and around Thailand—so much so that *The Hollywood Reporter* pegged him “Hollywood’s man in Southeast Asia.”

Here Simon shares his top tips for a producer who is considering Thailand, and how to set up production in the most efficient way.



### RESEARCH STAGE

“The first people to reach out to are production and location crew who have recently filmed in the country. Also, multiple perspectives from various departments are best.

“Then identify production service companies that have done projects that you admire and/or are similar to your own production. Reach out to multiple options and speak with the ones best suited to you and your production.”

Another argument for Thailand: “Don’t forget the world-class hotels and restaurants!”



### DATING STAGE

“Request a paper scout to see what options Thailand has for your production. You might be surprised and be able to move additional location and studio work there. Once you have identified a partner and know the basic options, commission a project-specific scout and possibly a budget.

“The Thailand Film Office is available to assist you at any stage of your production. Though they do not recommend particular service partners, they can familiarize you with the permitting process and film incentives. Your local service partner will need to work with TFO for all permitting and related processes.”



### SETTING UP FOR SUCCESSFUL PRODUCTION

- Consider local sourcing for crew and equipment.
- Look into the film incentives and foreign actor tax exemption.
- Look at studio builds: “The quality of the art department in Thailand is world-class, and there are a growing number of world-class studios.”
- Look into how Thailand can stand in for your other Southeast Asian locations and sets: “We doubled for India, Bangladesh and Australia on *Extraction* and for Hawaii on *Finding Ohana*.”
- Look into local partnerships: “The Thailand Film Office and Tourism Authority of Thailand have assisted some productions with additional soft-money grants and in-kind partnerships. Thai-based companies have also done in-kind and product placement partnerships in the past.”