

LIFE

It's a very strange thing to feel attacked because of your race. It's not supposed to happen in America, yet we're the most racist country

ASIAN-AMERICAN COMEDIAN AND ACTRESS MARGARET CHO • ENTERTAINMENT B7

TRAVEL



The view finder

Ramji Natarajan scouts locations for Indian film productions and has been to 140 countries, including Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Bolivia and Iceland

Kalpana Sunder
life@smp.com

Kyiv's blue Mariyinsky Palace, residence of the Ukrainian president, is an important piece of scenery in recent Indian superhit *RRR*.

The palace and its surrounding park were the location for one of the big-budget film's most ambitious sequences, involving actors Ram Charan Teja and Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao, 50 dancers, around 300 extras and an orchestra.

Filming in Ukraine was the idea of "location guru" Ramji Natarajan who, for 27 days last year, was responsible for the 1,000-strong cast and crew while they were in the country's capital city.

A film scout since the 1980s, Natarajan – who has found locations in 75 countries for more than 1,000 films to date – must deliver unique and cost-effective backdrops that showcase the chosen location's beauty to Indian audiences.

When I reach Natarajan by phone, he is in Tunisia scouring the North African country for his next film location.

"I have been walking in the bazaars experiencing the energy and chaos," he says. "I also visited a beautiful colosseum from Roman times. Another day, I was in the middle of the Sahara desert, jumping into water in a natural oasis."

Below: Ramji Natarajan in his acting days.



Bollywood films involve a lot of song, dance and action, and many Indian filmmakers prefer foreign locations for them; the crowds are more manageable and obtaining permission for shoots is often much simpler than at home.

However, until 1996 not many filmmakers went abroad. That year, the Indian government made the licensing and regulation of foreign exchange simpler, and locations in countries such as Switzerland quickly became favoured by the nation's filmmakers.

Natarajan was prepared. "I was a bad student and would just manage to pass my courses," he says. "My mother sent me to a typewriting course so that I would at least become a personal secretary or clerk."

"I used to play a lot of games like cricket and badminton, and also do the odd modelling assignment that came my way. Through a common friend, I met the famous comedian Nagesh, who thought I may have a talent for acting, and that's how I got my first movie."

Natarajan, who was recently featured in the Netflix docuseries *Creative Indians*, was given his

break as an actor by director Dasari Narayana Rao, in the film *Swapna* (1980).

"I acted in around 40 movies [including *Trimurthulu* (1987), as the villain in a fight on a bus in Hong Kong] but found that I was stuck, not really making progress," he says. "Some friends offered to back me financially if I started a travel agency. I started Travel Masters India in 1991."

By then, he had already had his first scouting commission, for the film *Rudranetra*, which was shot in Malaysia and Singapore in 1988. "That was the beginning of my journey as a location scout, and I had finally found my calling," he says.

"Though I have been given this moniker of 'location guru', what I really do is much beyond logistics and scouting for a location."

"It starts from advising clients on locations, to organising tickets, booking hotels, getting visas, moving technical equipment, advising them on tax breaks and rebates, moving around a team of as many as 100 people and dancers and stuntmen, and a whole gamut of other activities around shooting a film."

Among the more unusual

locations Natarajan has procured have been the Salar de Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia, where a dance routine for the film *Sarrainodu* (2016) was shot; and a remote black-sand beach in Iceland for the hit song *Gerua*, which appeared in the Rohit Shetty film *Dilwale* (2015).

According to an article in the *Hindustan Times*, *Dilwale* was responsible for a significant increase in tourism from India to Iceland.

"I specialise in 'film tourism'," Natarajan says, "because by watching these movies shot in exotic locales, people have aspirations of travelling to those places and therefore these movies act as free publicity for those countries."

Natarajan has taken producers and directors everywhere from Lake Baikal in Siberia, to East Java in Indonesia, Machu Picchu in Peru, and North Macedonia – but things don't always go to plan.

"Once, when we were travelling for a movie shoot to Uzbekistan, our camera and equipment got confiscated at the airport. It was a terrible experience. Sometimes if your local partners are not strong, they let

you down badly, [which also] happened once in Kazakhstan."

In 2014, he spent 51 days shooting in China – including Guilin, Huanglong, Yangzhou and Hangzhou – for director Shankar Shanmugam's action thriller *I*, roping in some of the best martial arts experts in the country.

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RAMJI NATARAJAN

"In China, the language problem was acute and we needed an interpreter at all times. For an action sequence in the ancient village of Hongcun, we used the services of [a] Hong Kong action director."

Natarajan has become an expert in sourcing cost-effective alternatives that can be made to resemble cities such as Paris or Milan. For the 2017 action thriller *Mersal*, he helped transform the Macedonian National Theatre in

Skopje into Paris' Palais Garnier opera house. With a cast and crew numbering 1,000 people and a shoot lasting 10 days, Natarajan estimates that shooting in Paris would have cost 10 times what was paid in North Macedonia.

Natarajan's newest prize find is Azerbaijan, where the cities can easily stand in for Dubai or Paris – especially at night – and the people are extremely friendly and easy-going, which makes the shoots easier.

In a world of technology and information, I have to stay relevant to my clients

RAMJI NATARAJAN

"I always have to stay ahead of the curve, as the world of movies is dynamic and constantly changing and upgrading. In a world of technology and information, I have to stay relevant to my clients and help them get the best optics for the least cost."

His most precious possessions, he says, are his 16 passports, filled with stamps from across the world. He has travelled to 140 countries, met heads of state and been honoured as a tourism ambassador by countries such as Switzerland and Spain.

In the past few years, Natarajan has begun to take on much larger films, location planning for productions such as *Baahubali* – in which a "Swiss ice kingdom" was in fact shot in Bulgaria – and *RRR*.

He has 30 projects in eight countries under way. "I am even looking at handling cross-border film projects that do not involve Indian movies – like a Japanese movie, for example, that needs to be shot in Europe," he says.

"What I love about what I do is that it's full of enriching experiences and learning. I am lucky to be able to indulge in slow, meaningful travel," Natarajan adds.

"Just shooting one song may sometimes take six days. I have the luxury then to just soak in the sights of some exotic locale. Shooting a movie may take months on end and, as I am not a part of the actual shoot and more concerned with logistics, I have the time to explore a new place."

"Every day is different, and it gives me the opportunity to meet people from various countries and cross-sections. I feel that real wealth is travel, as it gives you a deep knowledge and understanding of the world, which is priceless."

From knives to ramen bowls, Tokyo's Kitchen Town is a sensual feast

Julian Ryall
life@smp.com

A deep bowl with a stunning, hazy blue glaze has caught my eye but, as I set foot into the mildly chaotic interior of the shop, the proprietor rushes forward, his arms outstretched in anything but a greeting.

Seeing my reaction, he quickly reassures me that I am indeed welcome – but then points at my shoulder bag, waves an airy hand at his stock and gives me an awkward smile.

Komatsuya is jammed floor-to-ceiling with beautiful – but delicate – pottery. The shelves are weighed down with thimble-sized sake mugs and decorated pots for green tea, while the floor is awash in rectangular plates for fish dishes, shallow bowls for soy sauce, deeper ones for ramen, rice bowls, serving dishes and countless others. Breakages in this business must be a constant source of concern.

Very carefully, I slip my bag off my shoulder and make sure I'm extremely careful where I place feet that are larger than those of the average Japanese customer in Kappabashi – more commonly known as Tokyo's Kitchen Town.

A short distance from the Asakusa district, famous among visitors for its photogenic Sensoji Temple and stores selling tourist trinkets, is a district that offers an entirely different experience. And a glimpse into what happens behind the scenes in Tokyo's countless bars and restaurants.

Kappabashi Dougugai Street runs as straight as an arrow for nearly 1km north from Tawaramachi Station, on Tokyo Metro's Ginza Line.

The selection of kitchenware and utensils on display is mind-boggling. At one store, a stack of square frying pans – perfect for rolled omelettes – competes for space on the pavement with coffee grinders, braziers for the kitchen of a yakitori restaurant, and a display of cake tins.

A neighbouring shop apparently specialises in ironware for the kitchen.

Elsewhere can be found garlic crushers and ice cube trays, long-handled chopsticks used by chefs, doormats emblazoned with "welcome" in either English or Japanese, rolling pins and neon signs, weighing scales, leather-topped bar stools, wind chimes and waiters' aprons.

While the stack-'em-high emporiums of equipment are amazing to behold, Kappabashi is where the experts come to shop – so it is also home to the specialist stores.

For 400 years, the artisans at Tokuzo Knives have been forging blades, with each knife designed for a specific task.

The knives displayed on the walls have a variety of finishes to their blades and handles of rosewood, sandalwood or walnut. While each of these knives is a work of art, top-of-the-range examples come with a price tag to match.

A little further along is Nishiyama Shikki, which has been dealing solely in traditional lacquerware for the table since 1916.

Bento lunchboxes come in black lacquer with flowers and leaves picked out in gold, silver or red; others with fireworks, traditional images of pine needles or geometric designs. Bowls for miso soup are simpler but attractive in their own right, as are serving trays, mugs and chopsticks.

Across the road, Kappabashi

Soushoku dominates a corner with its display of signs. Outside red lanterns bear the characters for sushi, yakitori and okonomiyaki. Neon signs stand alongside more traditional chalk boards. There are door signs for "push" and "pull", restrooms, parking and exit.

Kappabashi earned a reputation for being the shopping place for kitchen supplies around 1910, although stores were in the district for several years before that.

The name is believed to have derived from either the raincoats – known in Japanese as kappa – that used to be hung on nearby bridges to dry, or from a local merchant called Kihachi Kappaya, who paid for a water management scheme in the neighbourhood.

Whatever the origin of the name, locals have adopted a type of mythical river sprite known as kappa as their mascot, and images of the mischievous, bald characters can be found throughout the

neighbourhood. Although many of the items available in Kappabashi would make wonderful souvenirs, a couple of shops tend to do the most business with tourists.

The windows of Tokyo Biken are a blaze of colourful – and convincingly realistic – plastic food. There are succulent steaks, fresh sushi, tall ice cream sundaes and fruit and vegetables of every description. These are all painstakingly produced replicas designed to be placed in restaurant windows to entice diners.

A slice of pizza looks good enough to eat, as does a pan of paella and a bowl of noodles. Realistic looking froth tops a pint of beer frosted on the outside. While most visitors might not require a full four-course meal in moulded plastic, Tokyo Biken has branched out and produces hundreds of key rings – each with a different food item attached, from a miniature slice of cake to a deep-fried prawn.

Feast your eyes.



Kappabashi is known for its kitchen goods, such as these sake flasks (right). Photos: Shutterstock, Julian Ryall

