

# THE MEXICAN INVASION

Mexico: a land of dusty desert highroads and breathtaking canyons, of Mayan ruins, Mariachi singers, tequila and tortillas. A beautiful country for certain, but not the first place that comes to mind when you think of cinema

Words: Will Simpson

➔ Mexico is going through a cinematic boom. The nation may have been producing films since the early years of last century, but it's only in the past decade that a new breed of Mexican directors and actors have made major inroads into Hollywood and gained international acclaim for their work.

Some of their names are probably familiar. Salma Hayek became the first Mexican actress of her generation to be accepted by Tinseltown and is now the executive producer of the hugely successful TV series *Ugly Betty*. She has been closely followed by Gael García Bernal, whose looks have earned him the sobriquet 'Sex Mex'.

Then there are the directors – Alfonso Cuarón, who graduated from films such as *Y Tu Mamá También* to directing *Harry Potter And The Prisoner Of Azkaban*; Guillermo del Toro, whose *Pan's Labyrinth* was a recent box-office hit; and most notably Alejandro González Iñárritu, the director of *21 Grams* and *Babel*, whose work has been lavished with such critical praise he now has A-listers like Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett queuing up for work.

## Location, location, location

The rise and rise of Mexican cinema has had a significance beyond fulfilling the artistic aspirations of a few individuals. It has placed what was, until recently, regarded as a developing nation firmly in the spotlight and given a huge boost to the country's tourist industries.

Countless films have used Mexico as a location in the past. It was Sam Peckinpah's favoured destination for many of his Westerns. *The Mexican*, a romantic comedy starring Julia Roberts and Brad Pitt, was partially shot there. Sly Stallone filmed part of the *Rambo* series in the country and much of *Titanic* was shot in the Sea of Cortez off the Baja peninsula. But these were Hollywood productions merely using the country as a backdrop. It's only now that modern Mexican life is being reflected properly.

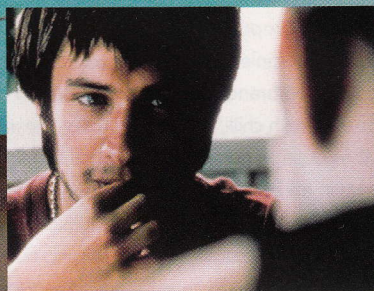
## Mexico's starring role

The first film to do this well was *Amores Perros*, directed by Iñárritu. Released in 2000 and set in Mexico City, its interlocking tales presented a searingly honest portrait of the capital. Here was a city of great contrasts – poverty, glamour and violence – but also a city with a vibrancy to match any US metropolis.

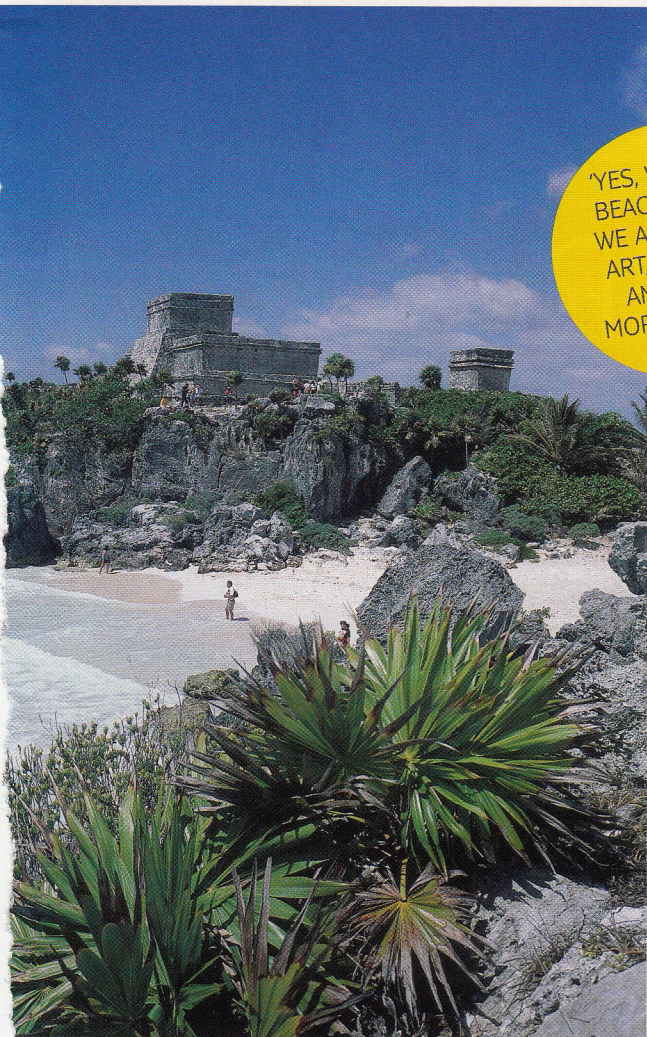
Just a year later, Mexico City's cultural side was represented by the Frida Kahlo biopic, *Frida*, starring Salma Hayek. The film was a major factor in the revival of interest in the artist and visitor numbers to the Frida museum in Mexico City are estimated to have doubled since the movie's release. This, in turn, has had a knock-on effect of increasing visitors to the city's other galleries.

Outside the capital, the contrasts of Mexico's natural scenery were showcased beautifully in *Y Tu Mamá También*. A coming-of-

Mexican actress Salma Hayek in *Frida* (above left); 'Sex Mex' Gael García Bernal in *Amores Perros* (above centre); A-lister Brad Pitt in *Babel* (above); Mexico's shores are peppered with Mayan ruins



YES, WE HAVE BEACHES, BUT WE ALSO HAVE ART, CULTURE AND A LOT MORE BESIDES'



## MEXICAN BACKDROPS IN THE FOREGROUND

### MEXICO CITY

Yes, it's polluted and overcrowded, but Mexico's capital also provides a thrilling, often beautifully disorientating experience. Its futuristic, chaotic feel made it the ideal backdrop for Arnold Schwarzenegger's film *Total Recall* (left). It is also home to 'the blue house' where Frida Kahlo was born and spent most of her married life with fellow artist Diego Rivera.



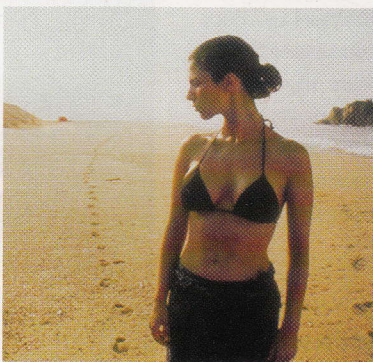
### BAJA CALIFORNIA

This is a peninsula that juts out into the Pacific, combining an almost endless succession of isolated beaches with a rugged interior. *Troy* (left) was largely filmed there, as were *Pearl Harbor*, parts of *The Fast And The Furious* and *Tomorrow Never Dies*. And lest we forget, Leonardo DiCaprio met his watery end in the nearby Sea Of Cortez in the blockbuster *Titanic*.



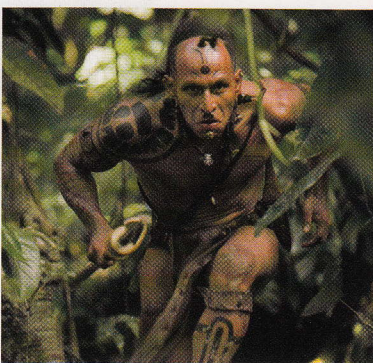
### HUATULCO

Resort on the Pacific coast where the three protagonists of *Y Tu Mamá También* (actress Maribel Verdú, left, during filming) chance upon Boca de Cielo, the imaginary beach they are looking for. Incidentally, a Boca de Cielo exists in real life. It's a lagoon further down the coast that used to be a smugglers' cove, but these days is a popular resort for families.



### THE YUCATÁN

*Apocalypto* was largely filmed in the Yucatán peninsula on the Caribbean coast, as well as Paso de Ovejas in the Mexican state of Veracruz. Along with neighbouring state Chiapas, the region was the stronghold of the ancient Mayan civilisation depicted in Mel Gibson's epic, set some time in the late 15th century. Actors, including Raoul Trujillo, donned traditional warrior adornments.



age tale that sees two teenage boys and one woman on a road trip to find an imaginary idyllic beach. While Bernal plays one of the lads, the film's true star is the landscape – the mountains, one-shop towns and beaches. For the Mexico Tourism Board, this film's release was a key moment. 'People were very interested in Huatulco in Oaxaca, where the beach scenes were filmed,' reveals Lupita Ayala from board's London office.

### Looking to the future

Five years on and 2007 looks set to be another year in which Mexico is well represented at the multiplexes. Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* was filmed largely around Veracruz and the Yucatán peninsula, and look out for *El Bufalo De La Noche*, a Mexico City-set flick out later this year.

Naturally the country's tourist sector hopes the success of Mexican cinema continues. 'These films have been a tremendous boost to the country,' says Ayala. 'They present a modern, diverse image to the outside world. Yes, we have beaches, but we also have art, culture and a lot more besides.' Anyone who still thinks Mexico is all Mariachi singers, tequila and tortillas has clearly been studying their popcorn instead of the big screen. ❖

 Thomson fly.com

For flights to Cancun visit [www.thomsonfly.com](http://www.thomsonfly.com)  
For holidays to Mexico visit [www.thomson.co.uk](http://www.thomson.co.uk)