



TVF International's
Brilliant Corners.

A World Away

The strong demand for travel docs is being fueled by innovative concepts, technological advancements and some compelling personalities. *By Neil Crossley*

Few genres instill a sense of aspiration and wonder quite as successfully as the travel documentary. From breathtaking cinematography to ever more innovative concepts, travel documentaries continue to attract audiences across the globe. Research released by Parrot Analytics in August 2019 shows that travel is among the top genres within the documentary market. While science and nature documentaries still dominate, Parrot Analytics' research concluded that travel docs experienced sustained growth from Q1 to Q2 in 2019. These findings are supported by producers and distributors, who report that demand for travel documentaries remains strong.

"There will always be a need for travel documentaries because we all want to be taken places and see locations we dream of visiting," says Holly Hodges, Twofour Rights' head of sales operations and a VP of sales. "What to eat, where to drink and knowing the inside scoop on secret spots to explore are all part of a person's travel experience. This genre has something for everyone."

It's a view echoed by Harriet Armston-Clarke, director of distribution at TVF International, who says that travel is one of the company's most requested genres. In particular, aerial travel documentaries continue to perform well, says Armston-Clarke, who cites "ever-popular" series *The World from Above* as well as *Aerial Asia*, *Thailand from Above* and *Vietnam from Above*.

These series appeal because they give audiences the chance to see places "from a perspective they would not usually be able to access," says Armston-Clarke. She also highlights the importance of standing out in what has become an increasingly crowded space.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

"In a world where travel is easier and cheaper than ever before, and most people have a camera on their phone, viewers can feel they have seen it all before," she observes. "So we are looking for shows that take viewers off the beaten track and that offer a reason to travel that isn't just to take another photo for Instagram."

Such shows include *Special Delivery*, in which six adventurers travel on a mission to bring aid to people living in some of the most remote places on earth, and *Brilliant Corners*, in which pro surfer Sam Bleakley travels the globe exploring emerging surf cultures.

This drive to expose viewers to ever-broader cultural experiences is also reflected in the current slate of travel documentaries offered by German distribution company Albatross World Sales, as Polina Axenova, senior sales manager, explains.

"We believe that a travel show needs to explore something new and unseen," Axenova says. "Great cinematography combined with strong characters giving a feeling of diversity and a multi-faceted exploration of a given place, culture or society are important. It's always good to let the locals talk and get that behind-the-scenes feeling."



Si King and Dave Myers take an iconic road trip in Twofour Rights' *Hairy Bikers: Route 66*.

She cites as examples *Greece! The Islands* and its sequel, *Greece! From the Mountains to the Shoreline*, which feature stunning aerial images and “lovable, if sometimes quirky, protagonists.”

REGIONAL TRENDS

Axenova believes that travel docs are less “universal” when compared to nature or science documentaries. She says that distributors need to be aware of each region’s specifics with regard to culture, religion and traditions—food, alcohol and clothing, for example—while at the same time, not forgetting about the current trends.

“A wine-tasting travelogue won’t be a bestseller in Muslim countries,” she says, “but there are also less obvious cases, as travel trends are very different across the globe.”

One example is hiking tourism, says Axenova, which is big in Europe. The trick, she says, is to know the broadcasters’ and platforms’ needs and restrictions, and to offer the right title to the right buyers and their audiences.

“There are a lot of travel programs out there, so we try to focus on those that are special in some way: a fresh concept, a charismatic host, a powerful story. Travel docs encompassing more than just travel-guide or travelogue types of content—especially if they are visually powerful—are generally more successful with international broadcasters and platforms. When talking about travel programs, it’s also important to mention airlines, which are naturally interested in travel content; our inflight sales have increased in the last few years.”

Distributors and producers report that demand for travel shows is coming from specialist channels as well as free-to-air and OTT services. “The demand is seen across the landscape,” says Amy Kemp, head of sales at Orange Smarty. “Some free-to-air broadcasters have regular lifestyle/travel slots to fill, but there are also volume deals to be made with the specialist channels and some OTT services.”

Armstrong-Clarke at TVF International also says demand is coming from all areas: “Linear and VOD, traditional

free to air and OTT.” She adds that such broad audience reach highlights the distinct appeal of the travel doc across the market.

“Travel is easy to watch, inoffensive and can appeal to a broad range and all gender identities, where other genres perhaps can’t,” she says. “We recently licensed *Fabulocity*, a series from OUTtv that sends vibrant hosts to cities all over the world, to Journy, Ovation’s VOD platform in the U.S.”

With demand for travel series remaining strong, there is rich potential for ancillary content to help promote and grow the brands. While some producers report limited demand for supporting content from broadcasters, others are proactively pursuing this option.

MILEAGE PERKS

Twofour adopts a very honed process for maximizing its productions with value-added content to make them stand out. The company has a dedicated team to build a social media presence for its brands. “We now consider what we can offer by way of additional assets: interviews, promos, recipes,” says Hodges. “This is an area we are focused on developing, and we are starting to see viewers finding our branded YouTube channels.”

Orange Smarty’s main priority is to localize any ancillary content to make it relevant to audiences. The company offers broadcasters supporting interviews and Q&As with the main presenters for some of its travel shows. In some instances, it will provide cut-down versions of the program that can be used for online promotion.

As audiences seek unique and aspirational experiences, the pressure is on producers to deliver a fresh spin on well-trodden locations. One of the most effective ways of doing this is via hybrid productions, which are documentaries that combine travel with other subgenres such as food, property, lifestyle, science, adventure and history.

“Hybrids provide an opportunity to put a different spin on the travel show format, so there is a desire for these types of shows,” says Orange Smarty’s Kemp. Strong



Albatross World Sales' *The Borderless Sky* is part science doc, part travel series.

sellers include long-running property series *A Place in the Sun*, which Kemp says continues to generate ongoing and new sales. "Combining both travel and property, the series follows house-hunters finding their dream homes in the sun. This returnable series allows the broadcasters and platforms more opportunities to promote the series and invest in the brand."

By combining two genres, travel hybrid shows broaden audience reach and attract different demographics. "The hybrid travel shows have the potential to attract a younger audience," observes Hodges. "Channels want to satisfy as many viewers as possible, and combining travel with other elements will likely bring more viewers and different demographics. I think the combination of genres helps create a story arc that wouldn't exist in a pure travel show, and this lures people in to stay tuned."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Travel and food is a potent hybrid, a fact borne out by *Hairy Bikers: Route 66*. The Twofour series, commissioned by BBC Two, will see Si King and Dave Myers riding along the iconic U.S. road through spectacular scenery, sampling the diverse range of regional cuisine across eight states.

Weird Food Diaries, *Vanishing Foods* and *Big Food* are among the series being distributed by TVF International, while long-running series *At Our Neighbour's Table* has proven to be a strong seller for the German factual outfit Autentic Distribution.

"If you look at *At Our Neighbour's Table*, which travels around Europe and meets locals that cook regional dishes, you can experience how food adds so much passion and emotion to a travel show," explains Patrick Hörl, the managing

director of Autentic. "Involving the viewer is key. That's why mixing travel and adventure is also a good idea."

When it comes to creating travel documentaries, the role of presenters can be paramount. Albatross' Axenova says that "open and funny" presenters work best for travel and lifestyle hybrids, while experts well versed in their fields are best suited for travel series with a scientific or educational slant. For travel documentaries focusing on a specific place or culture, meanwhile, local protagonists with interesting and unusual location-specific occupations or hobbies work well, she says.

Armston-Clarke at TVF International believes established, well-known presenters resonate best in the English-speaking international market, such as Penelope Keith in *Hidden Villages* and John Torode in *John Torode's Asia*. But elsewhere, TVF has found a real appetite for young presenters with an international background, a neutral accent and ideally some social media following, such as Sharda Harrison and Adrian Jalaludin, presenters of the new series *Walk This Way*.

TOUR GUIDES

Twofour's Hodges cites the "honest chemistry" of the *Hairy Bikers*, which is built on over 25 years of friendship and shared passions. She also praises hotelier and presenter Alex Polizzi, hugely popular around the world because she offers a wealth of experience in travel and business—and is a reputable, strong character loved by global viewers. "Recognizable hosts can be the real selling point in the international market," she says.

Hörl at Autentic says there is a stable and extensive market for hosted shows. These are mostly fueled by commercial broadcasters, specialist factual channels



Orange Smarty's *Michael Palin In North Korea* was produced by ITN for Channel 5 and National Geographic.

and SVOD services, he says. Clients who opt for hosted shows demand credible, authentic hosts with personality, he adds, although not every market appreciates hosted travel shows.

"There is still a distinct, affluent market segment that generally rejects hosts," he says. "These are often non-English-speaking markets and, most frequently, public broadcasters."

The evolution of travel shows in recent years has been driven by one defining factor—technology. 4K productions have emerged as the new gold standard for travel shows, resulting in high production values and allowing viewers to immerse themselves in beautiful landscapes and locations. Drones, too, have transformed the space, offering stunning panoramic views, while VR is also making its mark, helping to instill new clarity and color into vibrant destinations.

"In the digital age, there's absolutely no mercy for badly produced shows," says Hörl. "Production values are absolutely

key. If you can combine those with a particular perspective on the destination you're covering, you can stand out."

"Travel is increasingly being produced in stunning 4K, which allows viewers to experience exotic locations from the comfort of their living room," says Armston-Clarke.

While technology enables viewers to see well-trodden locations through dynamic new perspectives, shifts in traditional storytelling techniques also play a significant part.

TRAVEL BUDDIES

There is now increasing interest in strong characters within travel documentaries. These characters are generally on a mission, and they experience interesting people along the way.

Such characters are crucial to the story arc of good travel shows today, says Hörl at Autentic, as travel becomes a much more specific expression of one's interests and personality.

"As a consequence, we can see a long-lasting trend toward specialization in travel programs. Traveling to dangerous places, dark tourism (to places where dark moments in history took place), visiting spectacular architecture—all kinds of journeys become topics of travel shows that resonate with modern viewing habits."

Such encounters will become increasingly important in travel documentaries, concludes Hörl. "What we find is that new trends in real-life traveling are reflected in new travel formats. It's no longer just about distraction, escapism and lying on the beach." ■



Secrets of Arabia is among the travel doc offerings from Autentic Distribution.