

Walt Disney's "Swiss Family Robinson"

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FILMS

WALT DISNEY'S "SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON"

When Johann Wyss wrote "Swiss Family Robinson" over a century ago, in his wildest dreams he could have no idea as to the detailed pains Walt Disney would take to bring his story to life for the motion picture screen. In his ceaseless determination to produce this classic tale with true-to-life authenticity, Disney left no stone unturned.

Filmed amid the tropical splendour of the British West Indies island of Tobago, the story of a shipwrecked family's adventures on a deserted island stars John Mills, Dorothy McGuire, James MacArthur, Janet Munro, Tommy Kirk, Kevin Corcoran and Sessue Hayakama.

Disney chose as the site for his location filming the small West Indies island because here, after a world-wide search, he found a giant 250-foot Samaan tree that would hold the fabulous treehouse that would serve as the Swiss Family Robinson's home.

To this breeze-swept paradise some 20 air-minutes from Trinidad, believed to be the site of Robinson Crusoe's legendary adventures, Disney transported an entire motion-picture company, his cast and some 150 animals and 82 varieties of birds. Here a special zoo was constructed as well as a complete studio city, a project involving some 300 workmen. Some 30 special sets were also constructed for this film on the primitive location.

Two major sets — the wrecked ship and the fabled treehouse — were constructed on the island in a project that defied the impossible. The shipwreck, built at a cost of 170,000 francs, was a life-size reproduction of a three-masted 200-ton 18th-Century merchantman. Its construction was based on the plans for Captain Cook's famous "Endeavor."

Ten thousand feet of tubular construction steel and aluminium alloy went into the shipwreck's massive skeleton that had to be founded in submarine coral by blasting and drilling. The bow was laid in 20 feet of churning water by teams of native divers, and, as the complex framework mushroomed higher, wave callers were assigned to alert the workmen of impending dangers. When the tubular work was completed, deck planks were laid and caulked with tar from the Trinidad pits once used by Sir Walter Raleigh. The shipwreck remained a landmark on the Tobago seascape until it was blown up by the crew that built it for one of the film's climatic scenes.

To the members of the hand-picked production crew, skilled personnel who had worked on films like

"The Bridge on the River Kwai" and "Ben Hur," the shipwreck was child's play — there was nothing to match the spectacular treehouse in beauty and design.

Built in the 200-foot spread of the Samaan tree's giant limbs, the treehouse grew with the picture, as the Swiss Family Robinson built it. Once completed it represented a masterpiece of artistic and technical ingenuity. Constructed in a "split-level" design, it became an inverted triangle of rustic splendour with the principal room at the apex, the parents' room at the upper left corner and the boy's room to the right in the highest corner. The house could be easily reached via a retractable staircase.

On the ground by the massive trunk, Disney fashioned a bamboo kitchen and a roofless, stone-paved dinette. A passing stream turned a water-wheel which operated a vertical belt-line of cups which dumped water into a bamboo aqueduct filling a spigoted barrel over the turtleback sink and sent evaporable dropping down the cheesecloth sides of the refrigerator. Disney left no stone unturned, and it is conceivable that a shipwrecked family could live happily there to-day. The treehouse, barren of its interior settings, is presently for sale and can be purchased for only 33,000 francs, a fraction of its actual cost. Although there have been no takers as yet the Tobagoans regard the house highly and make sure all tourists visit it immediately.

In order to accomplish Disney's "Swiss Family Robinson" production dream, the island's one-horse port and ancient airstrips were bulging at all times. More than 100,000 tons of cement and plaster, 80,000 feet of tubular scaffolding, 18,000 feet of lumber, 8,000 sheets of corrugated iron and literally thousands of tons of props and other items were required to meet the challenges of Disney's production dream and to make that dream come true.



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