20th Century Fox's 'Titanic' Baja studio sold

by Diane Lindquist

SAN DIEGO - 20th Century Fox has sold the Baja California movie studio that was the filming location for such global blockbusters as "Titanic" and "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World."

Chris Petrikin, a 20th Century Fox spokesman, Tuesday confirmed reports that the company had sold Baja Studios, south of Rosarito Beach, Mexico, to Baja Acquisitions for an eight-figure price tag.

"We had a great run of productions and memories at the facility in Baja, beginning with 'Titanic,'â€š" a company statement said.

TITANIC - The movie 'Titanic' was filmed at the 46-acre oceanfront Baja Studios, which 20th Century Fox has sold. Photo by John Gibbins.

"Taking into account our production needs and given the availability of our two other extensive production facilities in Los Angeles and in Sydney, Australia, we decided to accept this lucrative offer from local financial interests and divest our stake in the studio."

In responding to a list of e-mail questions, Petrikin said the deal is in cash. He referred questions about the buyer and its plans for the property to Baja Acquisitions' attorney, Jerry Gumpel.

Reached Tuesday evening at his office, Gumpel refused to provide further details, saying, "I'm not allowed to comment."

The 46-acre facility was created in 1996 to house production of "Titanic," the fictional story of a rich girl and a poor boy who meet on the ill-fated ship. The $200 million movie, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, won 11 Academy Awards.

"When your first film out of the gate is 'Titanic,' how can you not have great memories?" Petrikin said.

The studio became one of the industry's premier water-tank facilities with its four water tanks, two of them located adjacent to 3,000 feet of oceanfront so that directors can make it appear that ships are afloat in the middle of the ocean.

For "Master and Commander," starring Russell Crowe, the Baja Studios tanks served as the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the Brazilian coast and the Galapagos Islands.

Equipped with stages, offices, scenery shops, dressing rooms and wardrobe facilities, the studio has produced parts of eight movies, television productions, commercials and music videos.

Other movies shot at least partly at Baja Studios were "Pearl Harbor," "In Dreams," "Deep Blue Sea" and the James Bond film "Tomorrow Never Dies."

There were no problems getting enough projects at the facility, Petrikin said, but it did call for the types of films that required its huge water tanks.

20th Century Fox is not giving up on filming in Baja California, he said, "but wherever you shoot depends on the creative demands of the films."

Petrikin declined to provide information on how much money was required to keep Baja Studios operating.

After director James Cameron's "Titanic" was finished, so many props and costumes were left over that a museum dedicated to the movie was created.

That morphed in 2000 into a movie theme park called Foxploration, which added the facades of New York City's Canal Street buildings in the 1900s and exhibits showing how a person climbs or perches on the ledge of a movie high-rise.

The studio's activities spread economic activity across the border region. Extras and crew members were hired from throughout Baja California and San Diego. Materials, supplies and services were purchased on both sides of the border.

Movie stars, directors and others connected with productions rented houses, condos and villas during filming.

"Titanic" contributed more than $60 million to the cross-border region during the nine months that production was under way, Baja Studios general manager Charles Arneson said at the time.

Titanic seafood joints, Titanic taco stands and Titanic souvenir shops sprung to life. A Baja California Film Commission was created.

Neither Arneson nor representatives of the film commission returned phone messages seeking comment Tuesday.

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