



Filmmakers Often Can't Seem to Use a Map

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NEW YORK —

Anyone taking a road trip to follow the Hoover family's route in the Academy Award-nominated "Little Miss Sunshine" should be forewarned: The movie shows the family driving hundreds of miles out of their way.

Most of us can think of countless films, TV programs or books that just didn't get the geography right _ and feel that the experience of losing oneself in a story can suffer as a result.

In "Little Miss Sunshine" _ a film with genuine heart that reflects the complexity of the human condition _ the discombobulated family drives on the interstate, instead of the formulaic two-lane highways typical of road-trip movies.

Had the filmmakers chosen to be vague about locations, or if they had filmed correct highway signs in the right order, the geographic inaccuracies might not have become such an unwanted distraction to viewers familiar with the journey. (Of course, they're probably irrelevant to those unfamiliar with it.)

Like the story itself, the making of "Little Miss Sunshine" was a family affair, co-directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, who are married with children. Faris mentions in the DVD commentary: "Our kids watch the movie for continuity issues _ that's their favorite thing, is to bust us on continuity."

Like so many Americans, it appears that the entire Dayton-Faris family could use some lessons in geography. (A National Geographic-Roper survey of Americans aged 18 to 24 last year found that nearly two-thirds of them couldn't find Iraq on a map _ though U.S. troops have been there since 2003, and half couldn't find New York.)

In the film, the Hoover family travels in their temperamental Volkswagen van from Albuquerque, N.M., to Redondo Beach, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles. From a symbolic standpoint, the family begins their journey at Bugs Bunny's famously recurring wrong turn, and then they literally turn their lives around in Redondo Beach.

The film accurately states that the fastest driving distance between the two locations is about 800 miles. But virtually every other geographic reference takes the Hoovers on a journey that circles, backtracks and teleports their yellow van across the Southwest.

Instead of the intended fast-as-possible trip from New Mexico to California, the film shows the family more than 200 miles south of Albuquerque. Then they travel north through central Arizona only to backtrack south again.

The direct route is along Interstate 40, parallel to the remains of famed Route 66. Scottsdale, Ariz., the Phoenix suburb where significant scenes take place, is a detour more than 100 miles south of I-40, and is about 400 miles east of Los Angeles.

The primary culprit is the shot passing an Interstate 10 sign after the first rest stop for breakfast and van maintenance. The only valid time on the route where the family would have any reason to be remotely near I-10

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would be near the end of their journey in California.

Since a correct road sign appears minutes later, placing the family in Flagstaff, Ariz., the filmmakers prove they had opportunities to film accurate landmarks. And unlike the detour passing the Carefree Highway (just north of Phoenix) or driving west toward the sunset at the end of the film (instead of due east toward Albuquerque), a shot of I-10 has no narrative benefits.

For years, films have taken creative license with geography to enhance the story.

In "Thelma and Louise," the duo head toward Mexico from Arkansas, but the story's climax requires them to end up at the Grand Canyon. So the filmmakers found solutions to bypass geographic accuracy. The women drive around Texas because Louise won't set foot in the state where she had been raped. By the time the liberated outlaws lose their internal sense of direction, they also lose sight of their desired destination, driving an additional 400 miles west instead of veering south.

The original "Rocky" is another film with geographic errors. Rocky's training run up the steps in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art has become a cinematic symbol of achievement. However, some residents of the City of Brotherly Love continue to point out how the run leading to those famous steps is a willy-nilly trek around town. They see geographic absurdity in the scene instead of feeling Rocky's sense of accomplishment.

When films get geography right, viewers benefit by experiencing a heightened sense of reality. In addition, residents of the depicted locale feel respected, honored and proud.

"Sideways" was so precise that it has helped increase tourism in Santa Barbara, Calif.'s wine country.

Even the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy was meticulously attuned to making sure that each shot matched the map of Middle Earth from J.R.R. Tolkien's novels. The painstaking detail enhanced the full-blooded fictional world while also satisfying longtime fans of the mythology.

So while the scattered route in "Little Miss Sunshine" may reflect the characters' emotionally bumpy ride, cinematic journeys bypass avoidable pot holes when filmmakers take the map out of the glove compartment.

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