

# Luke Skywalker's house - Rä di Martino's best photograph

'These are the remains of Luke Skywalker's childhood home, as seen at the start of Star Wars'



Skywalker's moisture farm ... the abandoned set in the Tunisian desert. Click to enlarge Photograph: Rä Di Martino Rä Di Martino/Rä Di Martino

**Interview by Sarah Phillips**

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**T**his is part of a project that began when I was using Google Maps to look at Chott el Djerid, the great salt desert in Tunisia. Intriguingly, someone had attached a photograph of some crumbling plaster to the online map with the strange caption: "There is no more English Patient." I discovered that The English Patient had been shot there - and Star Wars.

As I researched further, I found out that it wasn't uncommon for Hollywood and European productions to abandon sets in deserts. In Morocco, there are huge recreations of ancient Rome and Greece, plus a fake Mecca. There's also a replica of an American gas station, which a homeless guy has moved into. Over time, they become almost like archaeological sites.

So in September 2010, I spent a month travelling around Chott el Djerid. I tracked down three Star Wars sets in all. With only my Google map as a guide, I struggled at first to find anything. Then I met a driver who knew the desert well and offered to take me to the sites. We still ended up asking for directions at a police station and they told us it was 15km from the Algerian border - but only accessible by quad bike. Somehow we made it.

These are the remains of Luke Skywalker's childhood home, which we see at the start of the film - he was raised by his aunt and uncle, who had a "moisture farm" on the planet of Tatooine. After all my detective work, it was exciting to finally find the set. And

exploring it was unexpectedly moving: like many people, I saw Star Wars when I was young, so it felt very nostalgic. I spent a morning shooting, on both digital and film. The sand was brown-red and the speckles of salt sparkled in the sun. These are not real ruins, of course. They are just rubbish that has been left by a richer country in a poor country. But at the same time, they have a monumentality about them because they resonate with our childhood memories. Star Wars looks futuristic to us, yet this is the biological decay of past imaginations.

When my pictures were published, some Star Wars fans were annoyed that the house in this picture had been left in such a state of disrepair. So they spent four days and \$11,000 working with locals to restore it.

## **CV**

**Born:** Rome, 1975.

**Studied:** Slade School of Art and Chelsea College of Art, London.

**Influences:** Rodney Graham, Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, and Gregory Crewdson.

**High point:** When I plan a complex project and it not only works but I discover things I wasn't even hoping for.

**Low point:** When I find myself just staring at the computer and not really doing anything.

**Top tip:** Don't feel down if your work isn't appreciated.