



PRODUCTION GUIDE · BURRITO FILMS

Shooting in the U.S. without learning American production during the shoot

A production service guide to the United States for European production companies

Permits, crew, payroll, insurance, unions, budgeting and local production

A European production doesn't land in the United States by renting gear and hiring locals. It lands when someone translates it: the financing logic, the crew structure and the shot list converted into the American system. This guide is the manual for that translation, written from two schools we have practiced: the heavy machinery of a fiction feature shot in New York and the light machinery of a documentary carried through to its premiere on a Spanish streaming platform. Five parts: decide, build, protect the money, execute and close.

PART I · BEFORE YOU DECIDE

1. What a production service really is

The wrong frame: a vendor that rents cameras and forwards invoices. The right one: an American structure that takes on contracts, insurance, payroll and permits, and understands what the European creative team is trying to protect. A fixer gets you things; a service runs your film.

FIELD NOTE · NEW YORK

- Creative ask:** shoot the real city, no studio tricks.
- What it looked like:** an aesthetic stance.
- What it actually triggered:** a complete map of permits, unions and insurance designed from the first script read.
- Lesson:** a creative commitment isn't budgeted; it's translated first and budgeted after.

2. Do you need a full service?

Not always, and telling you so is part of the job:

Project	May be enough	You need full structure
Simple interview or single day	A local field producer with insurance	If a large European crew travels or locations are complex
Small documentary	Field producer plus insurance and payroll solved	Several cities, talent, vehicles, institutional permits
Commercial	Service production	Almost always
Fiction	Full service	Practically always

Important exception: minors, stunts, weapons, drones, water, street closures and other high-risk activities require specialized analysis from the start, even on a small project.

If your project lives in the left column, we'll confirm it and save you money. Good structure also begins with knowing when you don't need to buy it.

3. What actually drives the cost

Seven variables rule: city, number of shoot days, crew size, union versus non-union, number and complexity of locations, how many Europeans travel, and the risk level of the script. Two projects with the same day count can cost worlds apart: a ten-day interview shoot can be operationally simpler than a single day with a street closure, picture vehicles, guild talent and a hundred extras. Loose day-rate figures communicate less than these seven questions answered well.

4. The cost iceberg

Above the waterline, what Europe usually budgets: crew, camera, lighting, locations, transport. Below it, what the American system adds: payroll burden, workers compensation as required by jurisdiction, union fringes where agreements apply, permit fees, certificates of insurance, mandatory police, fire or site representatives, production parking, vehicle insurance, meal penalties and overtime, turnaround, payroll company fees, kit rentals, prep and wrap days per department, and cancellation exposure.

5. Who travels and who gets hired locally

The rule: the positions that carry the project's creative identity travel; the positions whose main value is knowing the market get hired locally. Direction, cinematography, production design, key talent and, depending on the project, the 1st AD tend to travel. Gaffer, key grip, electric, grip, locations, transportation, production office, PAs, drivers, local ACs and sound tend to be evaluated locally.

Every European seat generates four costs, not one: immigration, flight, lodging and per diem. Sometimes bringing someone inexpensive from Madrid ends up costing more than hiring senior in New York. And the counterpart: there are positions where creative continuity justifies taking on those four costs.

6. Immigration: the chapter that opens first

Anyone working on an American shoot needs status that allows it; entering as a visitor carries significant limits for work activities. The three routes the foreign audiovisual sector typically works with: the **I visa**, for representatives of foreign media, associated with informational content produced for a foreign employer, whose fit for documentary exists but is not automatic; the **O-1**, for profiles with a demonstrable career, built on a dossier of credits, press and letters assembled over months; and the **O-2**, for essential support personnel accompanying an O-1 in film and television. The line between them depends on the nature of the content, how it's financed, who the employer is and the specific role of each crew member: four variables analyzed per project and per person with immigration counsel, never by analogy with the previous shoot. The operating rule that never fails: this chapter opens months ahead, with specialized counsel, and the list of who travels is decided with the immigration map on the table, not after buying the flights.

7. Tax incentives

In the United States incentives are state-level and compete with each other; programs change with every legislature. Two stable truths: if the script allows choosing the state, the incentive can decide the shooting map; and incentives

reward certifiable local spend, which further reinforces a structure with an American entity and payroll. Current figures are always checked against each state's official sources at decision time.

PART II · HOW IT GETS BUILT

8. The contractual structure

Three pieces: the European production company, owner of the project and its copyright; the American service entity, which signs locally with vendors, locations, crew, insurance and payroll; and the service agreement defining scope, fee, approval flows and ownership of the material. The production company never loses its film; it gains an executing arm with American legal personality. To negotiate closely: who approves what and within how many hours, currency and cadence of remittances, custody of the material, and cross-border tax treatment with advisors in both countries.

FIELD NOTE · NEW YORK

Operational ask: a single point of contact between Spain and New York.

What it looked like: a sales slogan.

What it actually triggered: contractual architecture: entity, permits, insurance and payroll at the same table.

Lesson: when the plan changes on real locations, and it always changes, the production company makes one call, not seven.

9. Permits and locations: every city is its own country

Across much of Los Angeles, FilmLA centralizes many permitting processes, though certain cities, properties and jurisdictions keep their own circuits. New York adds layers: the city's film office for streets, parks with their own track, private buildings with their property managers, and infrastructure with sovereign authorities and their own clocks.

FIELD NOTE · NEW YORK

Creative ask: a sequence on live subway platforms.

What it looked like: a location decision.

What it actually triggered: a transit authority with its own process, months of lead time, operating conditions, specific insurance and dedicated logistics.

Lesson: institutional locations don't get added to the schedule. They determine it.

FIELD NOTE · DOCUMENTARY

Operational ask: say yes to a location on a few hours' notice.

What it looked like: improvisation.

What it actually triggered: knowing when paper is needed and when the space's permission plus live insurance is enough.

Lesson: in documentary, agility isn't the absence of structure; it's structure preloaded.

10. Location scouting is not location management

Scouting finds the image; management makes it shootable: owner approval, technical scout, power, load-in, holding, bathrooms, parking, neighbor impact, permit jurisdiction, the space's insurance requirements and the hidden cost of the company move. The cheap location that forces forty people to move for an hour can end up being the expensive location. Our scouts bring production alongside the eye: every creative option comes back with its feasibility sheet.

11. Unions, without fear

IATSE for crews, SAG-AFTRA for cast, Teamsters for transportation. Union or non-union depends on format, budget, city and early strategic decisions. The union route brings scales, fringes and working conditions, and in exchange the deepest bench of the most experienced crews in the world. Non-union exists and is legal in many contexts, with practical limits by city and size. In documentary, format often opens more flexible paths; every project gets analyzed without dogma.

FIELD NOTE · NEW YORK

Situation: a Spanish production company's first union payroll.

What it looked like: an unavoidable crash course in scales, fringes and hours.

What it actually triggered: the agreement's rules inside the shooting schedule from the first draft.

Lesson: your service takes the course, not your line producer at eleven at night. Cost arrives translated into a comprehensible weekly cost report.

12. Insurance and certificates

Serious locations typically request a COI and, where required, endorsements evidencing additional insured status. The usual package: production general liability, the workers coverage the jurisdiction and employment relationship require, camera and lighting equipment, and the script's special coverages: vehicles, drones, water, minors, effects, work at height. The European producer discovers this world when the property manager asks for the certificate 48 hours out; the service brings it solved because its American broker and master policies already exist.

FIELD NOTE · DOCUMENTARY

Situation: shooting opportunities on short notice.

What it looked like: documentary luck.

What it actually triggered: a policy sized for what the plan didn't know yet.

Lesson: in documentary, insurance isn't bought for the plan; it's bought for what the plan doesn't know yet.

13. Payroll: how an American crew gets paid

The structure we practice: local crew is engaged and paid through the American structure, with a payroll company, withholdings, the associated workers coverage and fringes where agreements apply; the European production company receives one consolidated cost against weekly cost reports. Paying American crew directly from a European entity easily creates tax and labor complexity in two countries at once; each project's exact formula gets validated by counsel, and ours exists so you don't have to invent it. On set, bilingual crews: the Spanish director's team's instructions land without friction, and the numbers travel to Spain in a format European financing understands.

14. Contracts, releases and chain of title

An international production generates a local documentary chain besides the creative one: crew contracts, talent releases, location agreements, vendor agreements, appearance releases, licensing where applicable, and labor and tax documentation. The goal is preserving a chain of rights that lets the material be exploited without discovering later that an American signature was left pending. If there's a buyer, distributor or platform, rights documentation may form part of the delivery, clearance or audit process: better built than rebuilt.

FIELD NOTE · DOCUMENTARY

Situation: reality shows up in front of the camera unannounced.

What it looked like: an impossible paperwork problem in the field.

What it actually triggered: releases prepared as part of daily field operations.

Lesson: documentary agility survives without mortgaging the material if the paper travels in the backpack, not the office.

15. Transportation: the invisible infrastructure

Cargo vans, passenger vans, department trucks, drivers, production parking, load-in and load-out, timed company moves, and Teamsters where applicable. In Los Angeles and New York, a bad transportation decision can cost more shooting hours than a bad camera decision. The movement plan is designed with the shooting schedule, not after it.

PART III · HOW THE MONEY IS PROTECTED

16. The American budget doesn't read the same

Estimate and approved budget, purchase orders and approvals, petty cash, actuals against committed costs, the periodic cost report, overages with their approval circuit, final reconciliation. Two disciplines deliver the peace of mind a foreign production company is looking for: approved budget doesn't mean final cost if scope changes, and every creative change gets a budget translation before becoming a production order.

17. The budget isn't protected by avoiding changes, but by controlling them

Shooting means changing the plan with incomplete information. The discipline isn't preventing it: it's knowing who can approve a change, what it costs, which departments it touches and how it gets documented. A location change can alter transportation, permits, overtime, holding, rentals and insurance; a seemingly small creative decision can move six line items. On projects of a certain size, each change is recorded through an approval, change order, revised estimate or the equivalent mechanism agreed with the production company. No relevant change reaches set as a financial surprise, whenever the reality of the shoot allows it.

18. Cash flow: when the money needs to be there

A production doesn't run on final cost alone: it runs on cash timing. Before the first slate, location deposits, rentals, permits, insurance, transportation and petty cash have already claimed money; payroll waits for no one; closeout brings its final payments. A production can be correctly budgeted and still lose operating capacity if remittances arrive late. The service is not a substitute for the production's bank: the funding schedule must keep enough cash available for approved commitments and upcoming payments. Our circuit: service agreement, agreed funding schedule, weekly cost report, continuous reconciliation, final cost report.

19. Hours, overtime and turnaround

The American schedule has physics of its own: straight time, overtime, double time under certain conditions, meal penalties, turnaround between days, forced calls, prep and wrap per department, travel time. The strategic consequence: optimizing the schedule can save more money than negotiating a camera discount. That's why the shooting schedule is designed with these rules inside from the first draft, and why "it's just two more hours" has an answer with six cost lines.

PART IV · HOW IT'S EXECUTED AND CLOSED

20. Translation in action

"We want to shoot here." Owner, permit jurisdiction, certificate of insurance, parking, holding, neighbors. **"We're bringing our gaffer."** Immigration, flight, hotel, per diem, interface with the local crew. **"It's just two extra hours."** Overtime, tomorrow's turnaround, transportation, location hours, rentals. **"Let's move the scene to tomorrow."** The

permit was for today, talent and crew availability, the location, the insurance covering today's configuration. None of these answers is a no. All of them are a price and a calendar.

21. Red flags: ten symptoms of a badly structured American production

The permit with no named owner. American crew hired directly with no defined labor structure. No American insurance broker on the project. Payroll burden unbudgeted. Overtime and turnaround outside the budget. The director scouting locations no one has checked legally or technically. Nobody knows who issues the certificates. Shoot money arriving after day one. No periodic cost report. Nobody knows what deliverables the final buyer will require. Three or more symptoms: stop and structure before spending further.

22. The realistic timeline (an operating example, not a universal rule)

T minus 16 to 12 weeks: immigration, institutional locations, incentive analysis. T minus 8: budget lock, key crew, insurance, scouting. T minus 4: ordinary permits, rentals, crewing, payroll setup. T minus 2: technical scouts, certificates per location, transportation plan, call sheet infrastructure. Shoot. Wrap plus 1: returns, payroll reconciliation, loss and damage. Wrap plus 2 to 4: final cost report and documentary closeout. On our New York fiction, the institutional clock started before almost everything else; on the documentary, the calendar was an accordion the structure could open and close without breaking anything.

23. The producer's decision tree

European crew traveling? Immigration now. Actors? Cast agreement map. Public infrastructure in the script? Institutional permits now. Closures, stunts, drones, minors, picture vehicles, water? Insurance and special permits. Several cities or states? Multi-jurisdiction structure. Platform or distributor confirmed? Deliverables from prep. Three or more yeses: you need structured local production before locking your budget, not after.

24. Post, closeout and deliverables

Production closeout is built from the start around the agreed delivery standard. When scope includes post and delivery, the work doesn't end at wrap: verified media management, clear specs and deliverables prepared against the buyer's quality control. Ask about deliverables on day one, not in the final month.

FIELD NOTE · DOCUMENTARY

Situation: premiere on a Spanish streaming platform.

What it looked like: a final post formality.

What it actually triggered: specs, QC and closeout documentation at the buyer's standard, prepared from prep.

Lesson: knowing the destination standard keeps QC from becoming the most expensive and uncomfortable week of post.

25. What a client actually receives

Before: script feasibility review against the American map, preliminary budget, immigration coordination with specialized counsel, location strategy, union route analysis, insurance strategy with an American broker, hybrid crew plan. **During:** local production management, American payroll, locations and permits, vendors, cash control and funding schedule, weekly cost report, bilingual production interface between set and Spain. **After:** returns, loss and damage reconciliation, payroll closeout, final cost report, complete documentation, and post and delivery coordination when in scope.

Exact scope is defined per project: physical production, immigration, incentives, post, clearance, payroll and other areas may be executed directly, coordinated with specialists or sit outside the scope depending on the production's needs.

26. Before requesting a budget: send us these twelve things

Project type. Dates. Cities and states. Shoot days. Script or treatment. Approximate crew traveling. Talent situation. Key locations. Union assumptions. Equipment assumptions. Expected budget range. Distribution and delivery requirements. With that we can quickly tell you not just what it may cost, but which parts of your American plan don't exist yet. That second answer is the one that protects your film.

We don't need the project solved before we talk. We come in precisely while decisions are still open. Send us the script, treatment or brief along with whatever you already know: we'll return a first feasibility read, the main American risks, and what we need to turn it into a budget.

Bring us the complicated one.

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This guide is general orientation based on real production experience. It does not constitute legal, tax, labor or immigration advice: every project validates its decisions with specialized counsel for its jurisdiction and circumstances.