

In New Zealand, touring Tolkien's World

By Mark Edward Harris

The global phenomenon created by Peter Jackson's blockbuster "Lord of the Rings" and "Hobbit" trilogies has spurred a number of themed attractions in New Zealand that I experienced during my visit last spring.

My trip was sponsored by Trenz, New Zealand's largest annual tourism event. At the Rotorua Energy Events Centre, 300 exhibitors showed their wares to 356 buyers from 28 markets.

Many, such as the Middle Earth Trilogy (www.themiddle-earthtrilogy.com), Fine Tours New Zealand (www.finetoursnewzealand.co.nz) and Gray Line New Zealand (www.graylinetours.co.nz), have movie tie-ins to their products.

For this assignment, I did my home-work at 35,000 feet, catching up on the two "Hobbit" films I had missed from the extreme comfort of Air New Zealand's state-of-the-art Premium Economy Spaceseat on the carrier's 777-300 out of Los Angeles.

Before venturing forth from Rotorua to follow in the footsteps of J.R.R. Tolkien's characters who had been brought to the big screen by Jackson, I joined many of the Trenz delegates in the hot springs at the Polynesian Spa (www.polynesian spa.co.nz) and toured the town's surreal geothermal landscapes at Sulphur Bay, Te Puia and Waiotapu.

Visiting Hobbiton

A must-stop for fans of the fantasy series is the Hobbiton Movie Set (www.hobbitontours.com), which is 45 minutes from Rotorua and two hours south of Auckland.

Visitors experience Middle-earth on a two hour tour, exploring the exteriors of the hobbit holes and sitting down at the Green Dragon Inn for a traditional meal that includes beef-and-ale pie washed down by a pint of Soutfarthing beer or cider.

While visitors can take home books and memorabilia from the Shire Store, perhaps the most treasured souvenirs are the countless selfies taken in front of the residence of Bilbo Baggins.

Hooray for Wellywood

Wellington's film nickname, not surprisingly, is "Wellywood," and it is the home base for the film empire of Jackson, a New Zealand native.

Jackson's Weta Cave Workshop (www.wetaworkshop.com) has tours guided by technicians involved in the movie making process. A 45 minute "Thunderbirds Are Go" Behind-the-Scenes Experience in a separate, dedicated studio gives guests the opportunity to get up close and personal with the models and miniatures behind the popular TV series.

While in Wellington, the who's who of the film industry often choose the Museum Art Hotel (www.museumhotel.co.nz) as their home away from home.

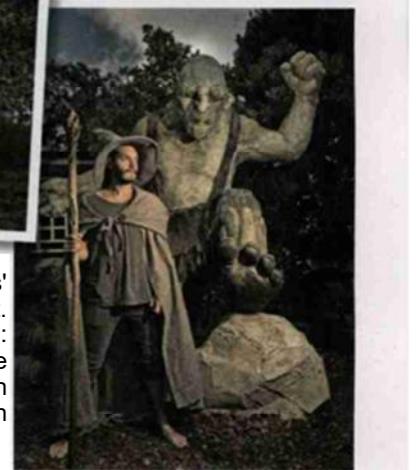
South Island has 'Rings' to it

A short flight across the Cook Strait brought me to Nelson, home to Jens Hansen, the Ringmaker, the jewelry studio that created "the One Ring" for the two fantasy trilogies.

Jens Hansen passed away in 1999, but his son Halfdan carries on the family tradition. Visitors can walk out with officially licensed replicas.

Visit www.tourisntnewzealand.com and www.trenz.co.nz.

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Clockwise from top: Bilbo Baggins' house on the Hobbiton Movie Set, which is two hours from Auckland; a J.R.R. Tolkien fan gets into the act outside the Weta Workshop in Wellington; the Pelorus River in Marlborough.

The next stop was Abel Tasman National Park, where I went down-river, not in a barrel like Bilbo and the dwarves did in "The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug," but in a much more manoeuvrable kayak provided by Pelorus Eco Adventures (www.kayak-newzealand.com).

Our next stop was Mount Olympus to the film site that was called South of Rivendell, this time by air with Reid Helicopters (www.helicoptersnelson.co.nz), courtesy of the same company Jackson used to shuttle his cast and crew for the trilogies. An extended helicopter tour included Mount Owen to see the landscape used in the scene where the Fellowship exited from the mines of Moria. We were able to make it to Middle-earth and back in two hours, leaving time to visit the world-renowned wine region of Marlborough for an afternoon tasting.

Christchurch-based husband and wife team Brian and Paula Lucas operate Wildsouth Discovery Limited (www.wildsouth.com) with a number of itineraries that show off the beauty of South Island, including film locations such as Mount Sunday, which was transformed into Eodoras, the capital city of the Rohan people in "The Lord of the Rings."

As Jackson recognized, the landscape of his native country not only lends itself to the imaginary world Tolkien envisioned, but to film projects where stunning visuals are an integral part of the story.

