

New Zealand retains identity as Tolkien's Middle-earth

I flew to New Zealand to visit a real country, but instead found myself exploring an imaginary world.

The sign at Wellington's airport no longer reads "Welcome to Middle-earth," but "The Lord of the Rings" movie trilogy, filmed in New Zealand by Kiwi director Peter Jackson, is impossible to escape here. The entire country looks like a movie set.

Not that I was trying to escape. I read "The Hobbit" as a teen and burned through the "Rings" trilogy in college. I loved them. Then the movies came out, and I loved them

more, which is why I happily parted with \$95 to tour nearby filming locations.

For those who haven't read the books or contributed to the movies' \$2.9 billion gross, the plot revolves around nine companions, a fellowship of Middle-earth's different races, on a quest to destroy an enchanted ring and save the world from evil. Hobbits, lit-

tle people with big appetites, provincial views and unexpected courage, figure prominently.

Jack, the tour guide, started leading "Rings" tours after leaving a job in IT, figuring it would be fun work for six months. He's still doing it more than two years

later with the manic enthusiasm of a lifelong J.R.R. Tolkien fan.

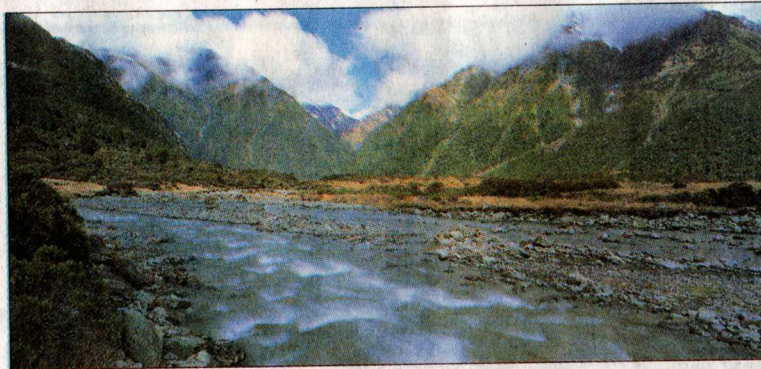
It should be noted here that there are fans, and there are fans. I like Tolkien, but Jack's had people on the tour who've seen the movie 400 times. Others spoke Elvish. I personally knew someone who decorated with "Lord of the Rings" action figures. Fandom can be scary.

The tour began auspiciously. Not only was it sunny, a rare thing in Wellington in winter, but there were eight tourists plus a guide.

"We have a Fellowship today," Jack said. "Ooh, that's special."

The van first stopped at Mount Victoria, amid a small pine forest overlooking the city where Jackson filmed the hobbits' flight from their home in the Shire. At one

point Frodo, the protagonist, stares down the road in horror as enemies approach. Actually, if you stand in the same spot you see houses on the opposite side of the harbor.



New Zealand Tourism

New Zealand has long been known for its wild and scenic landscapes. Now it is also known as the stand-in for Middle-earth in "The Lord of the Rings" film trilogy.



CLAIRE BUSHEY

Bushey: New Zealand embraces hobbit lovers

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Little remained of Bree, a set built from a condemned army base. The pub scenes there, like all the movies' drinking scenes, were filmed using SobeRing Thought, a nonalcoholic beer created after filmmakers asked a New Zealand brewery to develop a drink that looked good, tasted good and sidestepped the problem where, as Jack said, "after 40 takes it's a different kind of party."

The film's creation is filled with similar stories.

These movies belong to New Zealand. It's not hard to find people who worked as extras; the desk clerk at my hotel played an elf. When the trilogy's final installment premiered in Wellington, more than half the city turned out for the parade.

"Every bank was doing hobbit-saving schemes," Jack said. "Bakeries were doing lembas."

The tour visited a quarry, site of Helm's Deep and the city of Minas Tirith, and Rivendell, the Elvish stronghold shot in Kaitoke Regional Park.

Afterward, I picked up my complimentary ticket to the "Lord of the Rings" exhibition at Te Papa, the national museum.

The trilogy's costumes and props are more impressive close up than on screen. The screen does no justice to the quality of the costume fabrics, weight of the weapons or size of the "miniatures."

The model of Minas Tirith is larger than a grand piano stacked atop a Hummer.

I spent more than two hours wandering through the exhibit and had to return a second day to see the rest of the museum.

Other displays included an earthquake exhibit, Maori artifacts and one I skipped, subtitled "a loving look at sheep."

The stereotypes are true; New Zealand really does possess a ridiculous number of sheep. But if sheep and agriculture have defined the country's past, it may be that hobbits and tourism will shape New Zealand's future.

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Te Papa Museum

Costumes and props from "The Lord of the Rings" are on display at New Zealand's Te Papa Museum.