

Chicago Tribune



TOURISM NEW ZEALAND

The Ultimate "Lord of the Rings" Tour takes visitors behind the scenes in New Zealand.

'Lord of the Rings' tour

"The Lord of the Rings" is 60 years old, which means serious fans with money and time on their hands should get to New Zealand to immerse themselves in all things Rings. The Ultimate "Lord of the Rings" Tour: A 60th Anniversary Celebration is a private 11-day customizable luxury package from Zicasso aimed at filling that niche. Among highlights are visiting remote filming locations by private helicopter, a behind-the-scenes tour of the Hobbiton set and a private visit to the Weta Workshop with access to props and costumes of Middle Earth. Pricing starts at \$7,000 per person double occupancy and includes 10 nights' lodging in luxury accommodations, including New Zealand's only "Lord-of-the-Rings"-themed room. The Barliman's Room at Minaret Lodge in Wanaka aims to make you feel like a hobbit, and you'll even experience what's described as "a distinctively hobbit menu." Info: tinyurl.com/jw7uxc6

U.S.-focused cruises

Cruises that concentrate on U.S. ports of call aren't that common, but for 2015, Blount Small Ship Adventures is serving up two on its intimate 88-passenger vessels. The eight-night Big Apple to the U.S. Capital has four sailings, operating in alternating directions depending on the date. Passengers spend time in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Annapolis, Md., and Alexandria, Va., within sight of Washington. It's priced from \$2,999 per person double occupancy. D.C. to Boston is an 11-night cruise priced from \$3,999 per person double occupancy and has just one sailing date, June 11. Starting from Alexandria, it'll visit Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, New London, Conn., and Newport, R.I., before ending in Boston. Some tours, lectures and local entertainment are included on both cruises. Info: 888-618-4770, tinyurl.com/

Cities rated by weather

WalletHub.com, a website that offers a variety of tools for making financial decisions, has delved into the realm of weather with an analysis of 600 U.S. cities to see who has the best and worst weather. Its analysts reasoned that weather can affect financial outcomes. Charts rank cities on mild weather overall, as well as individual breakouts by season. The analysis took into account temperature and humidity, precipitation and snow, sky conditions, poor weather conditions and extreme weather. Not surprisingly, California cities top the charts both overall and by season. Surprisingly, though, San Diego, which many people think has the country's best weather, ranks in the 35th percentile overall (the 1st percentile is best) and in the 51st percentile for four seasons overall. Juneau, Alaska, by the way, sits at the bottom in both comparisons. Here's an odd one: New York, sitting at 65th for mild weather overall, tops 10 Florida cities. Check the charts at tinyurl.com/nchj2gn.

— Phil Marty,
Special to Tribune Newspapers