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It's Not Just Hobbits in New Zealand (But They Certainly Help)

DESTINATION & TOURISM | JAMES RUGGIA | MARCH 25, 2015



PHOTO: Hobbiton at sunset, where the operators try to represent Tolkien's imagined culture in a fun but serious way. (Courtesy of Tourism New Zealand)

Another April is coming around and they'll be revving their engines up once again for the Highlands Race to the Sky in New Zealand's Cardrona Valley (April 17 to 19). More than 100 cars, bikes and buggies will scale the longest gravel hill in the world across about six miles and 135 turns, as it climbs from 450 to 1,500 meters above sea level. The road to the top has not been quite so difficult for Tourism New Zealand (TNZ), but nobody can deny that New Zealand's national tourism agency is enjoying

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the view from the top.

Speaking at the ITB in Berlin, Gregg Anderson, TNZ's general manager Americas & Europe said, "The Hobbit just keeps on giving. Close to one in five American visitors to [New Zealand](#) [attribute their visit to a Hobbit-related reason](#). [Hobbiton](#) is attracting about 300,000 visitors per year. In fact one in eight of all tourists to New Zealand visit Hobbiton."

The [Hobbiton Movie Set](#), which is 50 percent owned by director Peter Jackson, is located in New Zealand's Waikato region and has become one of the country's top attractions. In fact, the very concept of attractions is a departure for a destination that grew popular for its incredible natural bounty and the charm of its boutique-scaled cities. It wasn't a place of theme parks or top-rated cultural institutions.

"We explain the business of making a movie to our visitors, but we're also representing the culture that was imagined by J.R.R. Tolkien," said Henry Horne, Hobbiton's sales manager. The 1,250 acre Hobbiton site is ideal for cruise visitors, located about two hours from Auckland and about 25 minutes from Rotorua.

When asked if the Hobbit trilogy was as popular with travelers as the Lord of the Ring (LOTR) trilogy, Anderson said, "LOTR put New Zealand on the map, but we know a lot more about how to market the films in tandem with the destination than we did then. At TNZ we have marketed The Hobbit series much more effectively than we did LOTR."

For Anderson, who plans to retire before long, Hobbits have been a major influence in his career at TNZ, much of it in the Los Angeles office. Before Jackson teamed up with TNZ over the LOTR trilogy (2001 to 2003), the destination was marketed almost exclusively under the 100% PURE New Zealand brand. The brand lives on celebrating New Zealand's pristine natural state. While it hasn't lost that distinction, it's certainly seen these two film trilogies impact its success in much the same way that The Sound of Music caught Austrian Tourism by surprise in 1965. As Sound of Music celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, it's still driving people to Salzburg.

That was one film, but New Zealand's gotten the adrenal push in a franchise with six separate films. "Listen, the Tolkien franchise comes only second to the James Bond franchise in popularity," said Anderson. "It's ahead of Star Wars and Harry Potter. It's generating visitors to New Zealand from 86 nations around the world."

Small wonder then that [Hairy Feet Waiomo](#) began offering 90-minute tours of a Waikato area farm used by Jackson to depict Trollshaws Forest in The Hobbit: An



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Unexpected Journey. It should be interesting to see if Bilbo and Gandolf can match the Von Trapp family for longevity. Let's just hope the other 100% PURE New Zealand also thrives. You wouldn't want to see them evict the glow worms from their cave to create a Grotto for Smaug and a new attraction.


Next on the list for New Zealand is the FIFA U-20 World Cup 2015, which will be held across seven host cities from May 30 to June 20. Twenty-four teams from across the world will contend in the tournament that attracts an estimated 170 million TV viewers from 100 countries. The FIFA U-20 Football World Cup is the second biggest FIFA football tournament.


On another front, Amazing Race host Phil Keoghan is partnering with TNZ on a [cycling campaign](#) to showcase New Zealand as the ideal place to cycle and vacation. Keoghan was the owner of a professional women's cycling team who won numerous state and national championship titles. In 2009 he cycled across America in 40 days raising more than a million dollars for Multiple Sclerosis research and made a critically acclaimed documentary about the journey. He also just completed 3,338 miles around France to retrace the route of the first English speaking team in the Tour de France, which is soon to be released as a feature length documentary.


"You don't need to be an experienced athlete to take advantage of cycling in New Zealand, there's a range of cycle trails that cater to all fitness levels, with each of them taking in stunning scenery," said Keoghan. Cycling trails in New Zealand are often close such other activities as wine tasting, hiking, jet boating and bungee jumping. The campaign, which runs through May 31, will appear online and in print and aims to illustrate that New Zealand cycle trails are diverse and accessible.

It seems a long time since New Zealand was seen by many Americans as an add-on to an Australian journey. As a destination over the years, New Zealand has carved out an identity that doesn't need to borrow from Australia. Last fall, Virtuoso said New Zealand was one of the hottest destinations in the world and said its own sales to the country had grown 196 percent growth year-on-year.

There's a reason so many Hobbits call it home: great food and drink, the majestic Southern Alps, Maori culture, the Bay of Islands and so much more.

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