

How a Hobbit Tours New Zealand: Real Places from the Movies You Can Visit

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Hobbit and Lord of the Rings fans can step into the Shire at Hobbiton, which includes the vegetable garden and mill. (Claude Budin-Juteau)

When a barefoot Peter Jackson stood before a private crowd of 200 or so at the Roxy Theater in Wellington, New Zealand, on Nov. 6, he was characteristically disheveled, like the photos you typically see of him. Yet he was remarkably clear-eyed for having gone weeks on only a few hours of sleep each night.

The audience at the Roxy consisted of 75 contestants from around the world — and their one guest each — who'd bested 140,000 fanboys and fangirls for a free weeklong trip to New Zealand to visit many of the sites where the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* films have been shot.

On this last night, before fans returned to their quotidian, non-hobbit lives, they were treated to a brief Q&A with the reclusive director and a special screening of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, which Jackson was still editing at the time (thus the long workdays); it opens in the U.S. on Dec. 17. It's the final film in one of the most successful movie franchises of all time, beginning with *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 2001, and the single best thing that's ever happened to New Zealand tourism.

New Zealand's long been a draw for adventure-sport adrenaline junkies, lured by its jagged mountains and untamed rivers. But these days, at least by Tourism New Zealand's reckoning, 13 percent of visitors have Middle-earth in mind when they come.

And the land of the Kiwi doesn't disappoint. Everything Tolkien envisioned, from the rolling green hills of Hobbiton to the cold granite Mountains of Angmar, was perfectly captured and filmed within a country the size of Colorado.

Whether you're a "Ringer" looking for the Shire or a trekker in search of a challenge, here are some places to start, and some of the best New Zealand has to offer.

Hobbiton/Matamata



A hobbit hole from Hobbiton. Everyone wants to live in one. (Claude Budin-Juteau)

Charming little Matamata, with its outdoor cafés and tourist shops, is the gateway to nearby [Hobbiton](#), where visitors can tour the movie setting of the Shire, with its hobbit holes, the vegetable garden, mill, and the Green Dragon Inn (where there are specially-made hobbit brews on tap). When Jackson originally discovered this North Island location in the late '90s, it was a 1,250-acre family-owned working sheep and cattle farm, as it still is today – though Jackson has since become a partner. It's almost impossible not to succumb to the magic bubble that was created here, as you and 2,000 other tourists a day wander past colorful round doorways tucked into the hillsides, their tiny gardens bursting with flowers. "I could live here," you start to think to yourself, until you remember it's a set. However, Russell Alexander, whose family has owned the farm since 1978, says there are future plans to build accommodations at Hobbiton, so you too can someday rest your head in the Shire.

Wellington



The view at the top of the cable car at Kelburn lookout (Deb Hopewell)

New Zealand's capital – affectionately known as Wellywood – is also the capital of its burgeoning film industry, thanks to Jackson. This harborside city, on the southwest corner of the North Island, is lively and sophisticated, with a walkable, compact downtown and painted wooden homes spilling down from the surrounding hills. Take the red [Wellington Cable Car](#) to the top of Kelburn lookout for the best views of the city below. In the middle of the city, the green slopes of Mount Victoria stood in for the Hobbiton Woods. Just outside of Wellington are several sites used in the LOTR movies, including Kaitoke Regional Park, the location of Rivendell; both [Wellington Rover](#) and [Flat Earth](#) offer film-location tours. But if there's one thing not to miss, it's the [Weta Cave](#), where the magic is made; crew will give you an insider's view of how the special effects are made, using props that were made for the movies.



Gollum with a couple of Spanish fans, Nicolas Cuervo Gonzalez and Emilio Cuervo Blanco, who visited the Weta Cave for some shopping and an introduction to the creativity of the Weta Workshop artists (Louise Hatton/Tourism New Zealand)

Queenstown



In the background are The Remarkables, a popular element in Peter Jackson's movies. (Claude Budin-Juteau)

Queenstown, on the South Island, is mecca to thrill-seeking pilgrims, who come to ski and snowboard, paraglide, ride jet boats and mountain bikes, and engage in any other physical feat they can dream up. This is where, after all, bungee jumping got its start, just outside of town on the Kawarau Bridge in 1988, and where, 26 years later, thousands of people each year continue to get harnessed to elastic and fling themselves 140 feet to the river below. Set about midway on the long, narrow, glacial-fed Lake Wakatipu, this pristine resort town has as its backdrop the mountain range known as The Remarkables, named by the superlative-happy English who settled the place. Jackson is said to have called them "The Extendables," because they were used in so many scenery shots for his movies — and you can also see them, from atop Queenstown Hill, featured in the new Hobbit-themed Air New Zealand [safety video](#) that's gone viral.



Glenorchy/Paradise

At the northern tip of Lake Wakatipu — a gorgeous 90-minute drive from Queenstown — is the small town of Glenorchy, the jumping-off point to Mount Aspiring National Park. From Glenorchy it's about a half-hour to Paradise, the location of Beorn's house in *Desolation of Smaug*, as well as where Gandalf rode up to Isengard in LOTR.

Nelson



Halfdan Hansen, son of Ring designer Jens Hansen, holds the 6-inch One Ring his father created. (Photo: Deb Hopewell)

According to the locals, the South Island town of Nelson enjoys the most sunshine of any place in New Zealand, and is the place where Kiwis themselves go for holiday. It's also an enclave of artists and artisans, whom Jackson turned to when he needed a jeweler to design The One Ring. The shop of Danish designer Jens Hansen, "the Ringmaker," stands on a corner of Trafalgar Square, though Jens — who made 40 rings, including one that was more than 6 inches in diameter — died before he could see his creations on the big screen, and his sons now run the business. Nelson is a perfect base for exploring the three national parks (and many wineries) that surround Nelson; book a tour with [Wine, Art & Wilderness](#), which will customize the program to suit your interests.

Pelorus River



The Pelorus River, where the Hobbit barrel scene was filmed (Deb Hopewell)

It's one of the most memorable scenes in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*: Bilbo (Martin Freeman) aids the dwarves' escape by helping them hide in wooden wine barrels, which drop into a roaring river, thus setting off a whitewater ride from hell. The currents, natch, were enhanced by special effects — on a recent visit, the emerald-

green Pelorus River (about an hour outside of Nelson) was cold but languid. (Though it can rise dangerously high, and quickly, when rainstorms hit the nearby mountains.) [Pelorus Eco Adventures](#) will take you down the same stretch of river used in the movie, providing there's enough — but not too much — water running.

Canaan Downs



Canaan Downs was the backdrop to several Hobbit and LOTR scenes. (Deb Hopewell)

Climbing up an hour or so from the Tasman Bay and Nelson, you'll reach Canaan Downs, the hilltop location of several Hobbit scenes; the same area of forest was used in *An Unexpected Journey* as the party rides horses through the beech trees toward the Trollshaws, and in *Desolation of Smaug* as they run toward the safety of Beorn's house. In its noncinematic incarnation, the Downs are managed and maintained by a collective that maintains and protects the area, welcoming campers and mountain bikers (there's a two-hour descent to the coast) in exchange for a small donation.

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