

## Travel / Outdoors

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### ‘Hobbit’ locations bring action, adventure to travelers

New Zealand continues to cash in on the popularity of filmmaker Peter Jackson’s J.R.R. Tolkien stories.

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AUCKLAND, New Zealand — Bilbo and company are back on the silver screen in the second of director Peter Jackson’s three-part adaptation of the adventure fantasy tome “The Hobbit.” While fans flood to theaters, New Zealand’s tourism machine is pumping out new location tours the way only Kiwis do — with a dash of down-home and a heaping spoonful of adrenaline.

From trekking boulder-strewn meadows in Trollshaw Forest, kayaking the Pelorus River in the wake of barrel-bobbing dwarves to horseback riding Beorn’s house and woods, the pickings just

got a lot brighter in the country whose identity is now inextricably linked with Middle-earth.

But do movie locations as a basis for travel make sense? If you’re looking for some thrills and a lot of scenery, it just may. According to Jared Connon, supervising locations manager for the film company 3 Foot 7 Ltd. and all three “Hobbit” films, “What’s amazing about filming on location in New Zealand is how diverse the landscape is and how quickly it changes. You can travel from snow-topped mountains, through lush tropical forests, across gently rolling countryside and down to the ocean all within the space of three hours.”

But before you decide that setting a travel itinerary around a collection of movie locations is just for the bona fide wonky — I counted myself a skeptic — it turns out a well-planned road trip with locations as points of interest will get you to places off the beaten path you may never have considered otherwise. I started my own journey through Middle-earth with a list of the latest tour operators, winding my way south from Auckland via rental cars loaded with GPS and a few quick commuter flights.

#### Ruakuri Cave

After a night flight to Auckland from Los Angeles, I headed south to Ruakuri Cave in the North Island’s Waitomo region. One of 300 known limestone caves in the area, Ruakuri played a sound-only role in the first “Hobbit” movie. Here, ancient limestone formations and spectacular crystal tapestries are not only a stunning geologic wonder but also give a chilling bounce to sound that made them ideal for recording the background noises in the “Hobbit’s” goblin cave scenes.

If the eerie sound effects aren’t compelling enough, it’s also the place for an epic adventure. While

guided walking tours are the best way to get an overview of cave science, it's the spelunking, tubing and black water rafting excursions run by fifth generation farmer Angus Stubbs that provide the real action. For a treat at the lowest point of the elevated metal walkway, look down and you'll see a naturally occurring, still pool of water that might easily double as Gollum's pool.

As a destination by itself, Ruakuri Caves is somewhat off the beaten track. But as a stepping-off point for one of the newest locations operators, Hairy Feet Waitomo, it's well worth the trip.

### **Hairy Feet Waitomo**

From Waitomo it's a roughly 45-minute, very winding drive to the Mangaotaki Valley just beyond the small farming community of Pio Pio, widely recognized as the shearing capital of the world. It's also home to one of the newest tour operators, Hairy Feet Waitomo, managed by Suzie and Warrick Denize on their 280-acre sheep spread. While the oddly rugged country isn't top-notch farmland, it turns out to be a stellar filming site. Undulating hills stippled with huge boulders left akimbo from eons of erosion rest below massive limestone bluffs.

"This is where several pivotal scenes were filmed in the first movie," beams Suzie, pointing to a clearing where a burned-out farmhouse and troll campfire built from polystyrene were featured in the first "Hobbit" film. This is Trollshaw Forest to Hobbitophiles. While nothing remains of the filming that took place over four weeks here, for die-hard fans the location is instantly familiar, rewarding in the way an overdue visit to a beloved family home is.

A rock path through gnarled, ancient-looking trees leads to the massive, slightly tilting boulder marking the entrance of the Trolls' cave. The only reminder filming took place here is a small blue X still taped to the ground, a place marker for the character Bilbo as he examines his new sword, Sting. A few snaps with a replica sword and it's off to stand where Radagast the Brown and his Rhosgobel Rabbit sleigh led Orcs and Wargs away from the company of dwarves.

### **Hobbiton: The Shire**

Hobbiton, the most commercially successful filming site appearing in both "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" trilogies, is a must-see on any travel itinerary. Better known as The Shire, the site is maintained exactly as it appeared in the films. Devotees can walk along the Shire's winding paths past 37 hobbit holes, a community garden and the famous party tree. While the hobbit holes are still just facades — you can dip into one and see how they were constructed into mounds of earth — tours end with a mug of ale at the very real Green Dragon Inn, now a working pub.

Located in the small farming community of Matamata, 12 acres of local sheep farmer Russell Alexander's 1,250-acre farm were transformed into The Shire more than a decade ago. Here, the landscape softens and rolling hills dotted with sheep dominate every view. Its similarity with the English countryside is unmistakable, a reminder that Tolkien wrote his books while a professor at Oxford University in England.

While the location isn't technically new — it appeared in the "Lord of the Rings" movies as temporary plywood polystyrene props — it has moved from temporary to permanent status after a rebuild for the "Hobbit" trilogy.

"We have no plans on becoming Disneyland," Alexander tells me, pointing out the yellow door of Samwise Gamgee's hobbit hole. But the sheer effort to maintain its authenticity — several greens workers are meticulously painting leaves that belong on the famous oak tree above Bilbo and Frodo's door when I visit — make it obvious that maintaining the Shire's standards requires immense focus, a substantial labor force and a sizable budget. The result is a spectacular look at the realism props people bring to modern film, and is well worth a visit.

### **Aratiatia Rapids**

Some of the most memorable scenes from the second "Hobbit" movie are the dwarves bobbing in

barrels. Filming was done at two locations, the Aratiatia Rapids on the Waikato River just off the North Island's Volcanic Highway, and the South Island's beech tree-lined Pelorus River in the Marlborough region.

On a rocky outcrop at the base of the Aratiatia Rapids, 10 minutes outside the town of Taupo, film crews spent two days capturing roiling waters fall over boulders as regular releases of dam water flow down a narrow, bouldered channel. Short of a perilous walk down slippery rocks, a spin in a jetboat is the preferred and much more amusing way to see the rapids at their base.

I hopped on a jetboat at Rapids Jet, just off State Highway 5, below the rapids. The ride started with a quick zip up to the steep rapids before the water was released. The magic came after half an hour careening up and down the river, jumping rapids and doing speed-spins — I was soaking wet when I stumbled onto the dock — when the driver cranked the boat back up to the bottom of the falls for an “after” look at the torrent of water spilling over the rocks post-release.

A snappy commuter flight to the South Island's Marlborough region followed, and then it was a short drive to the coastal town of Havelock for a visit to Pelorus Eco Adventures. Here it's all about nature and a slower pace as I donned a vest and inflatable kayak for a half-day paddle down the Pelorus River's placid waters to see the rocky outcrop where barrel-riding dwarves exit their barrels and negotiated a ride into Dale in the second “Hobbit” movie. This location received an enormous amount of screen time, and we stopped for a sandwich and short exploration of the rocks and surrounding beech forest.

### **Dart Stables**

An hour north of Queenstown is Paradise, where I visited Dart Stables for its Ride of the Rings trek on one of six horses of Rohan still working at the stables. The 90-minute trek took me through the woods of Lothlorien, past the Misty Mountains and to the site where film crew spent two months building Beorn's house for the second film.

A favorite filming location of both cast and crew, “it is not only one of the most gorgeous parts of the country, but it means we all get to spend time in Queenstown, which is always a lot of fun,” according to Jared Connon.

And, after all, isn't that the point of travel?