

carrie

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IN NEW ZEALAND even a nondescript cut in the woods can lead somewhere extraordinary. That magnetic pull to see what's around the next bend, whether sparkling glacier or primeval forest, is my favorite thing about the country—its “round-the-corner-ness,” as I call it. Here on a pastoral sheep farm on the North Island, I feel the buzz. A clearing opens, and I step into a story. ¶ The vista in front of me also struck native filmmaker Peter Jackson. Recognizing the spot instantly as Hobbiton, the hobbit community written into legend by J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), Jackson immortalized it on screen in six movies, the last of which came out in 2014. As I survey the scene, I can see Gandalf, the stories' sage wizard, driving his pony cart through the banked hills of the valley. I imagine Bilbo Baggins racing out of

the gate without his pocket handkerchief. In front of me are 44 hobbit holes nestled into rolling green hillsides. Paths lead up, down, and over the hills. Laundry dries on the line. Apple and pear trees hang low with the last of the summer fruit.

I feel a catch in my throat. Though I had steeled myself for an onslaught of souvenir kiosks, Hobbiton feels like more than a movie set for tourists: It's my imagination brought to life.

As a 14-year-old in Minnesota, reading Tolkien under the covers by flashlight, I longed for the adventure and friendship found in the pages. Eleven years ago I followed my own quest to Wellington, the beating heart of New Zealand's film industry.

wanted to see New Zealand as a film set. I've always preferred to separate my love for Tolkien and the ruffled landscape that's become my home. But when my friend Lance Lones, a transplanted Californian who has worked in the film industry for 18 years, suggested we use film locations as markers on a road trip, he convinced me that the power of stories could help deepen my bond to both.

“We have a real emotional connection to film. Don't underestimate it,” he said. “Come with me to Hobbiton, and you'll see.”

EACH DETAIL at Hobbiton is a labor of love of Jackson and his team of wizards—right down to the moss on the fences, explains our affable tour guide, Aidan O'Malley, on one of 17 daily tours.

“Jackson decided to reverse the natural sunrise and sunset here, so he also changed the moss on the fences to reflect that,” O'Malley says, grinning. “Hobbiton only appears in *The Hobbit* for seven minutes, and in *The Lord of the Rings* for 35 minutes—that's a lot of perfection for 42 minutes.”

After touring the grounds, Lones and I wind down the day at the Green Dragon, Hobbiton's working pub that appeared in the films. A fire roars in front of us, the sunset glowing through the round windows at our sides. Massive macrocarpa beams cross the ceiling, carved with grapes, barley, and a serpentine dragon in faded green. Herbs hang in the kitchen. Celtic music pipes gently overhead. I settle deeper into my leather armchair and take another sip from my clay mug of beer.

I strike up a conversation with Gemma Youlten and Tom Boreham, a British couple who are halfway through a round-the-world trip. I mention that the Green Dragon just might be the pub I've been looking for all my life.

“This is the highlight, I have to say,” says Youlten in agreement. She lowers her voice as if confiding a secret: “And I'm not even a *Lord of the Rings* fan.”

Boreham is. “I first read the book when I was ten—25 years ago—and it's my favorite,” he says. “I was concerned, to be honest, that they would Disney-fy my beloved Hobbiton. But I recognized this pub straight away. It's gob-smacking the way the idyll of the Shire is epitomized here. Only New Zealand could take a major movie attraction and make it feel like a place you're familiar with.”



The boardwalk at Tongariro National Park

In that time, as *Lord of the Rings* tourists flocked here by the thousands—quickly joined by *Hobbit* fans—filmmakers were translating the remote country's surreal landscape as the backdrop for movies ranging from *King Kong* to *River Queen*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* to *The Last Samurai*.

Even Hollywood tour de force James Cameron enlisted the technical prowess of Wellington's Weta Digital visual effects company to create the dystopian dreamscape of Pandora for his blockbuster *Avatar*. The North Island so enthralled Cameron that he purchased land in Wairarapa, east of Wellington, where he is working on a trio of sequels to *Avatar*.

In spite of all of that—or maybe because of it—I've never