There and Back Again: A Journey to Middle Earth By Lori Lindgren Voorhees

Aoteroa. Middle Earth. New Zealand. Three names for one place, for three aspects of one place.

I sought New Zealand first. From a young age, I'd heard of the natural beauty and varied terrain of these two islands settled by people from the British Isles. Later, on several trips to Hawaii, I learned a bit about the culture of New Zealand's earliest settlers, the Maori, the Polynesian people who emigrated from the Hawaiian islands. So then I sought Aoteroa, the Maori Land of the Long White Cloud. But ever since December 2001, when I sat in a darkened theater watching the opening run of Peter Jackson's first Lord of the Rings film, "The Fellowship of the Ring," aware that it was filmed entirely in Jackson's native New Zealand, I sought Middle Earth. In October 2006, I found it.

As a member of Red Carpet Tours' October Fellowship, my husband, I and a friend joined seven other Americans, three Britons, two Australians, one Canadian, one German and one Pole ranging in age from 13 to the early 60s from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds united by our love for J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" and the Peter Jackson films. The gracious, enthusiastic, well-experienced guides and co-owners of Red Carpet Tours and providers of monthly 12-day Classic Tours of Middle Earth are Vic and Raewyn James, retired educators and school administrators, who have been

researching, planning, fine-tuning and conducting these journeys for five years.

New Zealand's link to Tolkien's Middle Earth was forged many years ago. As Peter Jackson states in the forward to Ian Brodie's "The Lord of the Rings Location Guide book," he first read the three Tolkien books as a teenager on a 12-hour train trip from Wellington through the north island, his imagination superimposing the action onto the New Zealand landscape he saw out of the window. His native New Zealand provided Jackson with a wide range of varied terrains for filming: woodland, rivers, rolling farmland, soaring, snowcapped mountains, rocky brush land.

It's been long enough ago, with major filming in 1999 and 2000 and the release of Lord of the Rings films in December 2001, 2002 and 2003 respectively, that many New Zealanders, even those directly involved in the films, have moved on with their lives. Nonetheless, it was a precious time, and its joy can readily be summoned and relived. The Lord of the Rings era still resonates in Middle Earth, and New Zealanders are proud to have had the world view their scenic country on screen and even prouder to have visitors experience it firsthand.

October 10: The Shire

Our tour began October 9, early spring, in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. We arrived at 6:30 a.m. via Air New Zealand ("The Airline to Middle Earth") having "lost" a day crossing the international

dateline. After touring the Maori historical exhibits at Auckland's War Memorial Museum, we met the other members of our Fellowship at dinner. We departed early the following morning for our first site: Hobbiton, home of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins and their fellow Hobbits. The Hobbiton film set—"where the movie hobbit holes are hiding"--is located near the town of Matamata north east of Auckland and is one of the only two film locations at which any traces of sets remain. Hobbiton is on private property: a sheep farm owned by the Alexander family. Red Carpet Tours has an arrangement with the farm's owners, who provide tours of the site.

Peter Jackson spotted the Alexander family's farm, located in the agriculturally-rich Waikato region on the north island, in late 1998 while hunting for potential locations by air. Jackson sought an unspoiled farmland locale to represent Tolkien's Shire. The Waikato area, like Wordsworth's England, is "green to the very door." It is a true image of rural England, with its gentle, rolling hills, trees and grazing sheep. Ironically, the actual road that leads into the Alexander property, named many years ago, is Buckland Road, bringing to mind the Hobbit Merry, or Meriadoc Brandybuck of Buckland. As the bus turned onto Buckland Road, the Shire theme music, "Concerning Hobbits," from "The Fellowship of the Rings" soundtrack soared through the bus, heightening our anticipation.

The Alexander family operates a 1250-acre working sheep farm, with stock ranging from 5000 to 10,000 sheep during lambing season. No animals are confined; all roam free to graze. None of them starred in the films, however: they are in fact Romney sheep. Jackson used the Suffolk breed, whose black faces provided the most accurate English country look.

The actual location of the Hobbiton village set is well hidden from the road and is accessible via a 1.5 kilometer road built by the New Zealand Army to accommodate the equipment needed for on-site filming. Set construction took nine months. Filming began in December 1999 and concluded in March 2000. Up to 400 cast and crew were present each day, and the catering tent staff served three two-course meals daily, preparing, for example, 1500 eggs for breakfast.

After demolition of the sets began, the Alexanders were in contact with the film company 24 hours prior to the destruction of the last 17 Hobbit holes (Tolkien's word for the burrow-like homes). Keeping the remaining holes intact and opening the set area for private tours had to pass through the legal network of New Line Cinema, Peter Jackson and the Tolkien estate. Once they obtained permission, private tours began, and on Dec. 2, 2002, the Alexanders were given permission to use 16 photographs of the set as it appeared during filming. These poster-sized images are placed strategically through the set, enhancing the visitors' viewing experience.

Our gracious, ebullient Maori guide J.R., an Alexander family employee, took us through the different areas of the set, pointing out the lake over which the dragon firework flew after Merry and Pippin rifled through Gandalf's stock and set it off, the fabled Party Tree, an imposing broad crowned pine tree (under whose branches some of us danced in tribute to Bilbo's 111th. birthday), the location of the Green Dragon pub, and of course, Bag End, home of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins. We were enchanted. J.R. graciously photographed tour members dancing on the Party Field, peering out of Bag End's circular windows or relaxing on Bag End's terrace pretending to smoke pipes with Bilbo and Gandalf the Wizard.

After our Fellowship's gambol through Hobbition, we were taken to the Shire's Rest café for a sustaining country lunch, followed by sheep feeding and petting. Back on the bus, we watched the first few scenes of "The Fellowship of the Ring," allowing us to see with new eyes what we had all seen so many times before. Now, we had walked there.

Off we set for Rotorua, the Maori capitol of New Zealand, where several Fellowship members attended a hangi: a Maori feast and performance.

October 11: Mordor and the Emyn Muil, Gollum's Fishing Pool

Departing Rotorua, we stopped at the Waiotapu mud pools, reminiscent of Lassen Volcanic National Park's Bumpass Hell, and Huka Falls where we saw rainbows in the mist. Burberry's, a wonderful cafe

with delicious baked goods (we had scones) on the shores of Lake Taupo, was our next stop. Lake Taupo is quite large—as big as Singapore-relatively new geologically, having been formed by glaciers and a volcanic eruption in the 1st. century A.D. We stopped to throw floating pumice stones into the lake which is so clear one can see the bottom.

Our guide told us Viggo Mortensen, the dashing, rugged Aragorn in the films and an avid fly fisher, stayed at a lodge with his horse on the south shore of this lake during filming in the area, rather than staying with the rest of the cast. We popped down to one of the fishing shops and purchased a special Lake Taupo fly and a book on New Zealand fly-fishing—next trip!

From fair but blustery weather in Hobbiton, dark skies and very cold temperatures greeted us as we headed up to Mount Ruapehu and the nearby Whakapapa Ski Field, a suitable climatic and visual introduction to the land of the Dark Lord Sauron. As we climbed out of the bus, the skies blackened and driving sleet began to fall, soon turning to snow. This recent cold snap had been unexpected bounty for the ski area which had just closed for the season and had now reopened for scores of late spring skiers, sledders and snowboarders.

The terrain is replete with large, sharp jagged black volcanic rocks with fresh snow in between. The landscape is truly sublime, in the 18th. century sense of word: inspiring awe and terror. In retrospect, I am glad we went there in the more extreme weather than on a bright summer's

day, because the ambiance was more conducive to imagining the characters' despair.

Our Fellowship bundled up, some members stopping at the ski area shop to purchase warm gloves, and began our climb toward Mead's Wall, an imposing wall of solid rock, the site of Frodo's and Sam Gamgee's capture of creature Gollum in "The Two Towers." Even in my new Merino and possum wool gloves, my hands were so cold they burned and stung.

The ski field was also featured in scenes when the two hobbits first viewed Mordor at the beginning of "The Two Towers" and then wandered lost and discouraged looking for a way to reach the Black Gates. When we looked across, we had a view of the mountain used to represent Mount Doom itself.

As we climbed, we recalled our guide's offhand comment about Mount Ruapehu having "hiccupped" the day before we arrived in New Zealand. Later we discovered that Mount Ruapehu had erupted as recently as 1995, and said hiccup had in fact called for a high-risk warning from the Department of Conservation, before being downgraded to normal level the following day. But such occurrences are not unusual in such a geologically young country as New Zealand.

So, we had entered the realm of Mount Doom and escaped not only unscathed but not permanently frozen, with many photos to tell the story.

Keeping Gollum in mind, we drove to a hidden pool at the top of a waterfall used in "The Two Towers" as Gollum's fishing pool in which he cavorted, singing to himself, catching fish with his bare hands. Vic, our guide, pointed out that Andy Serkis, who played Gollum, came very close to the edge of the falls when filming that sequence. We were beginning to develop great respect for the cast, many of whom took similar risks and even incurred injuries like cracked ribs, broken toes, chipped teeth and damaged knees.

We arrived at our night's lodging, the Powderhorn Chateau in Ohakune, which housed the cast during filming in the area. The Powderhorn Chateau is reminiscent of the quaint little chalet hotels one sees in Switzerland, Austria and southern Germany, with flowered-filled window boxes, knotty pine interior and a cozy basement bar. We reveled in the glamour of staying where the stars had stayed. Several tour members slept in rooms formerly occupied by stars: the honeymooners got Elijah Wood's. We stayed in Andy Serkis' (Gollum') and imagined a white creature "sneaking" around talking to his other self.

For Peter Jackson's family's use during filming in the area, the hotel added a three-bedroom suite with kitchen and loft. We photographed the king-sized possum fur blanket on Jackson's bed.

Regarding possums, we discovered earlier in the ski area's visitor center, those New Zealand critters here are bigger, longer and meaner than the American "Pogo" variety. Imprudently imported in the 19th.

century to start a fur industry, they escaped captivity and now number approximately 70 million. Possums are considered a serious drain on the environment because they prey upon native plants and compete with native birds like kiwi for food. Whenever they can be captured, their skins are harvested and used in making clothing and blankets. Possum fur is luxuriously soft: it feels like rabbit mixed with mink. Later in the trip, at a Maori cultural presentation in Queenstown, one presenter joked that those who run over a possum while visiting New Zealand should receive national acclaim, and, if "you haven't hit one yet, there's still time before you go back home." Wanting to do my bit for the New Zealand environment, I dutifully purchased suede boots lavishly lined with possum fur.

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rlvoorhees@sbcglobal.net

Sidebar information

Red Carpet Tours' Web site: www.redcarpet-tours.com

E mail: victorj@ihug.co.nz