

JOURNEY TO MIDDLE-EARTH

ENERGIZED BY A BOOMING, POST-LORD OF THE RINGS FILM INDUSTRY, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND, IS A CREATIVE CAPITAL SET IN AN AWE-INSPIRING NATURAL LANDSCAPE. **MICHAEL JOSEPH GROSS** DISCOVERS THE CITY'S ROUGH-HEWN SOPHISTICATED, AND TESTS HIS STRENGTH IN THE SHADOW OF MOUNT DOOM. **PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEOFF LUNG**

MOUNT NGAURUHOE, 10 A.M.

Half a morning's hike across a treeless, lunar landscape of black lava boulders—covered with colonies of white-green lichen and ferns as tiny as babies' toes—gets me to the foot of the volcano.

Each rock along the trail looks like its own world, and every few minutes I've bent down for a close look, imagining myself shrinking to microscopic height, these flecks of plant life rising up like otherworldly forests.

A few yards on, a crossroads: the spot where the intrepid leave the trail for the tough climb to the summit, from whence the views—down into this mountain's red-streaked, sulfurous crater and out across a spiny trail of sister volcanoes—are said to be spectacular.

Looking up, scanning the mountainside, I count scores of hikers' improvised tracks, braided in the loose gray scree. For a few fearful moments, I hesitate—the grade is steep, about 45 degrees.

I scrunch my hat down to my ears so the cold mountain wind won't snatch it, and with each step, add my own trail of sliding, shaky footprints to the braids.

Until the 2001 premiere of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first part of Peter Jackson's film trilogy based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels, this peak, standing 7,500 feet high on the Central Plateau of New Zealand's North Island, was known only as Mount Ngauruhoe (after an ancient mythological hero of New Zealand's indigenous Maori people). Yet the mountain is so classically, conically volcanic that Jackson and the special-effects wizards of Weta Workshop, four and a half hours south in the country's capital city of Wellington, used it as the model for the key landmark of Tolkien's epic story, Mount Doom—a name that, for some, is now interchangeable with its actual one.

Ngauruhoe, like many parts of New Zealand, where the *Lord of the Rings* movies were filmed in their entirety,

was given new symbolic significance by Jackson's films, which won 17 Oscars, set box-office records, and inspired a fervent pop-culture following—nowhere more so than in New Zealand. "Everyone in this country had something to do with those films, whether it was a farmer whose land we crossed to get to a location, or the owner of a village pub in the south where one night Liv Tyler danced on the bar," says Jamie Selkirk, the Academy Award-winning film editor who worked on all of Jackson's films from his "splatter period" as a schlock-meister in the early 1990's through *King Kong*.

Ngauruhoe's symbolic evolution was especially dramatic because Mount Doom is the fulcrum of Tolkien's fable of humanity's obsession with power. Doom, in Mordor, is where Tolkien's hero, the hobbit Frodo Baggins, must bring the all-powerful One Ring so that it can be destroyed.

No part of New Zealand has been more changed by Jackson's movies, and by the growing film-production industry they sparked here, than the city of Wellington, at the North Island's southern tip. Despite being the country's capital, Wellington has long lived in Auckland's shadow, known to the wider world primarily as the place to catch the ferry to the South Island's geographic wonderland. But Wellington's show-business success has brought status to the city and helped

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nurture a vibrant scene of restaurants, cafés, boutiques, and galleries.

I went to Wellington to find out how the town has—and hasn't—been changed by its transformation into "Wellywood." I arrived just as Jackson was beginning to film a three-part, 3-D adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings*' prequel, *The Hobbit*, the first part of which will open in theaters this month.

Wellington's rise has been fueled, to a great extent, by the cult of personality: no Peter Jackson, no Wellywood. Yet though Jackson's is the name above the titles, the city's prowess in producing special-effects blockbusters owes at least as much to Richard Taylor and his partner Tania Rodger, a soft-spoken couple whose main business, Weta Workshop, and its sister company Weta Digital, based in the northern suburb of Miramar, produced effects and props not only for *The Lord of the Rings* but also for *District Nine*, *Avatar*, and the Narnia films.

Weta has also helped refurbish a 1920's Art Deco theater in Miramar called the Roxy, which opened the week I arrived in Wellington. The theater is a throwback to the luxurious movie palaces of the period, with custom brass and bronze details and even a gourmet restaurant, Coco, in the lobby. Over a lunch of lamb burger with *halloumi* cheese and pea compote, Rodger attributes Wellington's evolution into a film capital to "our number-eight wire attitude" ("number eight" being a type of baling wire that can be used to fix all manner of machinery) and explains: "It's our attitude that it's possible to make things happen here that makes things happen here."

The next afternoon, Taylor shows me around Weta Workshop, where I hold Gandalf's sword and peruse the company's collection of about a hundred actors' life masks (white plaster castings used as the canvas for prosthetic and makeup designs). Taylor is a mild-mannered, delightfully geeky man with the air of an absent-minded professor. Crumbs of foam and

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fiberglass dot his square hair and glasses—"I've been rendering Wargs," he says, referring to a pack of wolves that will appear in *The Hobbit*. When I ask him to describe the goal that's driven him to build this empire on the farthest edge of civilization, he says that it's "empowering a group of young New Zealanders to excel beyond their expectations—to believe they can do arts for a living. They can be a hobbit that can take a ring to Mordor."

I lived in Hollywood for years and reported extensively on the film industry, but I've never met anyone quite like this guy. He is the best in the world at his job, and yet he has almost no discernible ego. He seems genuinely driven by passion, not by desire for power. He and his employees and associates seem happy; many of them have become quite rich, and Wellington has created extraordinary places for them to spend their off-hours—and considerable incomes.

There is, in town, a chicken/egg debate about whether Wellington's show-business success was born of this town's culture—and the country's "number-eight-wire attitude"—or whether the best of Wellington culture was born of the box-office jackpot. The question's probably irresolvable.

business and the culture are enjoying a fine romance.

Wellington's most luxurious table is Logan Brown Restaurant & Bar, which serves impeccably constructed meals with locally sourced ingredients under the vaulted ceiling of what used to be a bank. For a perfect piece of salmon or blue moki, fresh as the afternoon, do not miss Ortega Fish Shack & Bar. The town's cafés—many of which have their own coffee roasters—compare favorably with Seattle and San Francisco's best. The airy, earthy Caffè L'affare is my favorite, with the Castro-kitsch-crammed Havana Coffee Works running a close second. The best bar in town, Motel, opened just as the *Lord of the Rings* odyssey began, and became

legend when the actors playing hobbits—and the special-effects guys who made the actors into hobbits—made it their off-hours hangout.

On a Friday night at Motel I ask Tommy the bartender to suggest a cocktail. After peppering me with questions—"What time did you eat? What did you eat? Did you have wine? White or red?"—he pulls down a bottle with a hand-lettered masking-tape label: "Duck Fat Rye." It was rendered, he explains, on the stove in his apartment. He mixes his take on a Sazerac, which is quite possibly the softest, most graceful drink ever to slide across my tongue.

"Tommy turned me from a boozier," says the owl-eyed stranger sitting next to me, "into a drinker."

For all its charms, Wellington is still a bit of a diamond in the rough. Its main drags, Lambton Quay and Courtenay Place, are clogged with shops; and its bohemian Cuba Street feels like an unreconstructed Lincoln Road, in Miami's South Beach. Taylor says, "We've always had an inferiority complex. We're a tiny small town in a country that nobody knows where it is. We're still sort of realizing that we can be a player."

Everyone you meet asks when you're getting out of town and where you're going. They're not just making conversation. They want to know—and they want to help you find your way. Most Kiwis are hearty, outdoorsy folks. About half of the population of 4.4 million lives in rural areas, farming and fishing are among the country's main occupations, and trekking ranks among almost everyone's favorite pastimes.

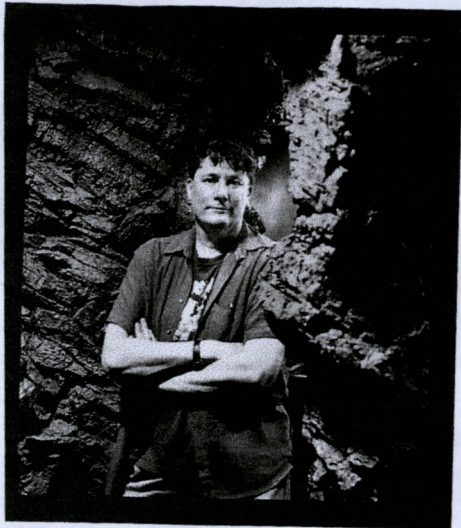
Their relationship to the land is paradoxical: both passionate and placid. The country has almost no poisonous spiders or snakes, and no native mammalian predators. (Before the Europeans came, the only mammals here were bats and seals.) As a result, New Zealanders have only cataclysm to fear—and Wellingtonians especially, since their town is built directly on a fault line, one that is due for a major correction. Many here were chastened by the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, which killed 185 and damaged more than \$20 billion worth of property—but they are resigned to living at the earth's mercy. "We all have plans—where we'll go, who we'll be with," says Alan Blundell, the strapping, six-foot-two owner and designer of Ohtel, Wellington's best boutique hotel.

"But disaster is either going to happen or it's not. There's no predicting, so you can prepare but you can't worry," says Matt Dravitski, a dairy farmer's son who runs Peter Jackson's production company, Wingnut Films.

On warm days when the sun comes out, it seems the whole city rushes to the waterfront: running, strolling, boardwalk that winds from the swanky Oriental Bay neighborhood past Te Papa, the immense national museum (whose treasures include the largest colossal squid ever caught), toward the old downtown and government center.

One day a few years ago, between Te Papa and Old Town, a group of Weta guys helped one of their colleagues, an English sculptor named Max Patté, place a half-ton, eight-foot sculpture of a naked man on the edge of the boardwalk. The figure looks as if he's falling forward into the bay. Patté had been feeling depressed after the demise of his marriage, and this creation was his way of coping.

The gorgeous, graceful line of the man's body yielding to gravity and the water draws a delicate connection



From left: Film special-effects master and Weta co-owner Richard Taylor at Weta Workshop; Weta Workshop co-owner Tania Rodger and film editor Jamie Selkirk at the Roxy Cinema.

 *Online extra! For more behind-the-scenes photos of Weta Workshop, including special-effects props and masks from the Lord of the Rings films, visit our blog at travelandleisure.com/travel-blog/carry-on.*

between the city and the land. Though some local leaders initially objected to the uninvited installation, it eventually won them over. Wellington bought the piece, which has claimed awards in several civic sculpture competitions.

At Weta, Patté, like almost everyone I meet, asks when I plan to leave the city, and when I mention Mount Ngauruhoe, his blue eyes light up. The mountain has long been one of the North Island's most popular destinations: before it was Mount Doom, it was a highlight of the 12-mile Tongariro Alpine Crossing, widely considered the country's most spectacular day hike. His response is typical, and typically *quotidian*—a wish that I'd have good luck with the weather.

People here take nothing for granted: "My first year in New Zealand, I drove up five times in hopes of making the trek," he says, "and five times the weather drove me home. But when I made it—it was amazing."

MOUNT NGAURUHOE, 11 A.M.

I am (I think) almost halfway up Mount Ngauruhoe.

But one knee—a knee I've hurt every few years since I was a teenager—starts feeling shaky, so I stop for a rest.

I wish I could get to the top. I've never looked into a volcano. And part of me says to go for it, even if I think I might fall. But I cannot separate the

part of me that wants this experience purely, for the sake of it, from the part of me that's embarrassed for not thinking I can do it, the part of me that's made of the worst kind of pride.

I think about my good luck with the weather. And I remember that statue on the waterfront, the man giving himself to gravity, trying to let that symbol lead me on.

Since I was little, I've imagined New Zealand as an ideal of pristine, remote exoticism: a chiaroscuro landscape of peaks and valleys inhabited by funny-looking flightless birds. Though real life rarely fulfills these kinds of fantasies, New Zealand does.

At dinner one night with entrepreneur Jeremy Moon, the charismatic founder and CEO of Icebreaker Clothing (manufacturer of fine merino-wool garments), another of the country's international success stories, I ask his 11-year-old daughter, Isabella, why foreigners should come to visit her country. Instantly, she answers, "We have nature!"—and describes some of her favorite animals, including the tuatara ("like lizards—but awesomer") and the takahe, a brilliantine-blue bird, which she once watched gobble down a duckling.

The next evening I take a guided night hike through Zealandia, a nature preserve in the hills above Wellington. We see a tuatara like the one Isabella

described to me—crouching, munching on something, staring at us with zero interest—and not one, not two, but three kiwis—implausible-looking creatures, like little feathered footballs on legs. "A three-kiwi night!" exclaims my guide, Jane: "I've never had one of those before!"

During the hike, just above the horizon, I catch a glimpse of the first constellation I remember learning about as a child: Orion the hunter. In the Southern Hemisphere, he's turned counterclockwise, lying on his back, and is known, I'm told, as "the Pot." The northern heavens' grand hero is, in the southern skies, a piece of kitchenware.

To me, that contrast of concepts dramatizes the understated humility of this place. A few days later, talking with a bus driver, I ask, "How do New Zealanders see themselves in the grand scheme of things?" and without missing a beat, he says, "We don't."

I wait for him to say more, and all I hear is bus tires singing down the road. "Say more," I say.

"We look after New Zealand," he says. "We want New Zealand to remain green. We want New Zealand not to go nuclear. We want to be as we are today and were yesterday: friendly to everyone, treating people with respect for who and what they are, provided it's mutual. And for four million people, we've done quite well."

The readiness of this answer, its easy blend of cosmopolitan scope and rural diffidence, astonishes me. At the same time, I am starting to think there's no reason to be surprised.

MOUNT NGAURUHOE, 12:15 P.M.

If I could keep climbing, I would. But I can't, is the truth. My legs won't hold me.

Or, I don't think they will hold me. Which means they won't hold me.

I sit. Eat a couple of energy bars. Take a good look at the view from here. Take some pictures. And I love what I see. Yet still, it's not the top. I won't make it to the top. My disappointment in that shortcoming swells until, bizarrely, it feels bigger than any of the mountains in my view.

When I pick my way back down Ngauruhoe and cross past Mount Tongariro, though, the land stops me thinking, shrinks me and carries me—through a massive crater's bowl, up a mountain and down, down to twin pools, crème-de-menthe-green, and as I keep descending, trees rise up around the path's subtropical, loamy-smelling end. That night I fill one whole page of my journal describing the different shapes of fern fronds I saw—E.T.'s-finger-shaped ferns, sine-wave ferns, backslash ferns, starburst ferns, opera-glove ferns—before collapsing on the hard mattress of a roadside motel and sleeping, in the deep rest that follows a day when you've done all you can.

When I get back to Wellington, the city feels different than it did before. Its rough edges and lack of refinements

don't look like flaws now. I see the city not as an end in itself, but as a gateway to the country, and I sense that its citizens' ambitions are different from what I've known ambition to be.

My last night in town, I walk to its great independent bookstore, Unity Books, and look for someone who seems clueful. Tilly, who turns out to be the co-owner, points me toward a book of poems called *Lucky Table* by the Kiwi poet Vincent O'Sullivan. Its title poem, in one of those coincidences that make you swear angels are stuffing postcards in a mail slot on the back of your skull, describes the measured, modest quality of New Zealanders' ambition that I'd been pondering all afternoon. The poem's narrator begins by wondering "what, ideally, one might have been," and goes on to describe a longing that involves "...no vast reshaping of one's/inner self, no fancying yourself in military apparel/singing in spotlights, curving so the sequins glitter/at the edge of the ring, just yourself as you/know you are in the chosen falling of light/in such weather as occurs...."

Coming home to New York, the jet lag is wrecking, the worst I've ever had. In my apartment, I lie on the sofa re-

watching *The Return of the King*, and the ending brings tears to my eyes—for how Frodo's journey makes it impossible for him to return home the same.

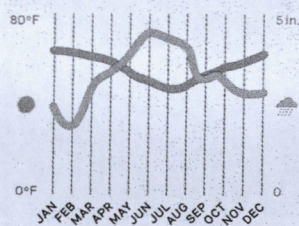
This time, though, I also see how the *Lord of the Rings* movies rhyme with the place and the people that made them. These are movies about little people drawn into a grand story, people compelled by circumstances to carry, for a time, burdens of power. They are not consumed by those burdens, but changed by them and made more fully themselves.

That's more or less how Wellington has handled its period in the spotlight, which won't be over for some time to come. This year the film director James Cameron bought a reported \$16 million property in New Zealand, where he will film two sequels to *Avatar*. Though Cameron is not known for humility—accepting the 1998 Oscar for directing *Titanic*, he hollered, "I'm the king of the world!"—who knows what effect Wellington's magic may have on him? After all, it's the kind of place that can give a creature of the rat race some strange and freeing thoughts.

There's more to climbing a mountain, for instance, than making it to the top. +



Weather



Getting There

Air New Zealand has direct flights to Auckland from Los Angeles and San Francisco. From Auckland, Jetstar and Air New Zealand fly to Wellington.

STAY

Bolton Hotel A stylish, 142-room hotel in the center of town. Corner of Bolton and Mowbray Streets; boltonhotel.co.nz \$

Ohtel 66 Oriental Parade, Oriental Bay; ohtel.com. \$\$

EAT AND DRINK

Caffe L'Affare 27 College St.; laffare.co.nz.

Coco at the Roxy 5 Park Rd., Miramar; roxycinema.co.nz. \$\$

Havana Bar Sangria and Spanish-style tapas. 32A-34 Wigan St.; havanabar.co.nz. \$\$

Havana Coffee Works 163 Tory St.; havana.co.nz.

Logan Brown Restaurant & Bar 192 Cuba St.; loganbrown.co.nz \$\$\$

Motel Bar 2 Forresters Lane, second floor; motelbar.co.nz.

Ortega Fish Shack & Bar 16

Waiararua St.; ortega.co.nz. \$\$\$

DO

Mount Ngauruhoe

Ask your hotel to arrange transportation; guides are available from Adrift Outdoors Guided Adventures.

Comprehensive information is available at nationalpark.co.nz.

Roxy Cinema 5 Park Rd., Miramar; roxycinema.co.nz.

Te Papa museum From ancient to modern, New Zealand's national treasures can be seen here. 55 Cable St.; tepapa.govt.nz.

Zealandia End of Waiapu Rd., Karori; visitzealandia.com.

SHOP

Unity Books 57 Willis St.; unitybooks.co.nz.

HOTELS \$ Less than \$200 \$\$ \$200 to \$350 \$\$\$ \$350 to \$500 \$\$\$\$ \$500 to \$1,000 \$\$\$\$\$ More than \$1,000

RESTAURANTS \$ Less than \$25 \$\$ \$25 to \$75 \$\$\$ \$75 to \$150 \$\$\$\$ More than \$150