

OUR NEW ZEALAND TRIP

PART 3: THE LORD OF THE RINGS

The thing about going to New Zealand isn't so much that you can go to the sites where they filmed THE LORD OF THE RINGS--you can even have your photo taken in front of a sign that says, "Aragorn's Cliff"--but that you feel like you're right in the middle of the book.

So, yes, we went to the place where they filmed Arwen's rescue of Frodo from the Black Riders at the Ford of Bruinen and to the spot where they filmed the mighty statues flanking the Rauros River, and, of course, Hobbiton. (More about that later.) And yes, we ate at the Cow in Queenstown, where the cast of Lord of the Rings ate, and at Molly Malone's in Wellington, where Sean Bean ate (and drank), and bought stuff at the Weta Works gift shop in Auckland.

But we wouldn't have had to do those things in order to experience Middle Earth. We were in it every day. On our way to Milford Sound we saw a place where a dense ancient forest came right down to the grasslands, just like the spot where the orcs camped and tried to kill Merry and Pippin. We walked through the depths of a forest to where water fell away into a black chasm. We saw a farm backed by, I swear to goodness, the High Hay. We worked our way through a cave that was the spitting image of the Mines of Moria except that the ceiling was sprinkled with elven lights. We walked through the bleak, dead landscapes of Moria. And everywhere, everywhere, we saw the Shire.

On our next to the last day in New Zealand, we went to Matamata to see Hobbiton, and it was beyond wonderful. As I said, Cordelia had been there before, but most of the sets had been taken down. The sheep farmer had had an agreement with the production company that they'd remove all traces of the sets and restore the farm to the way it was before, and they were in the process of doing just that when the weather turned bad. The crew asked for a few more weeks' extension, the farmer agreed, and in the interim, tourists began arriving in droves and the farmer realized what a treasure he had in Hobbiton.

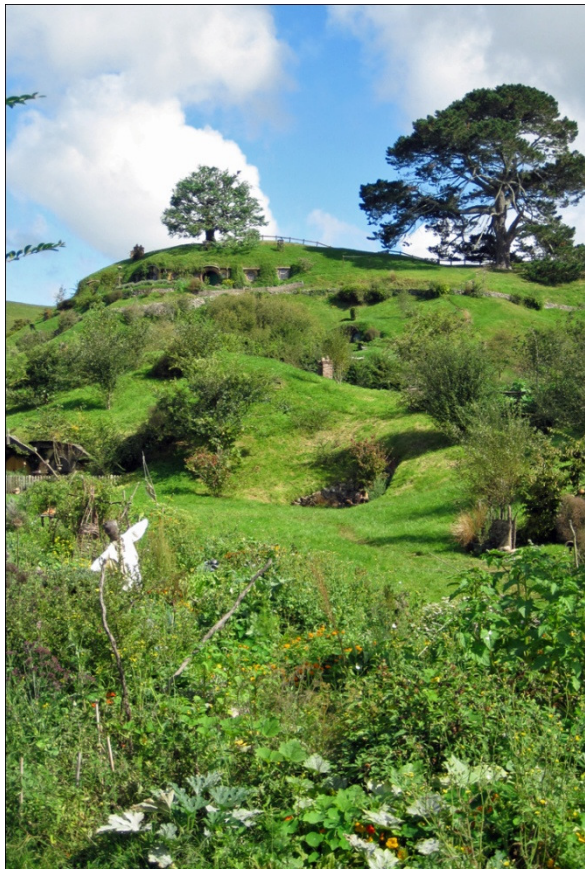
So this time, after the two movies of THE HOBBIT finished filming (just a couple of months before we arrived), they asked that the set be left just as it was, and we got to see Hobbiton in all its glory.



Not only were all the hobbit holes and chimneys in place, but so were the fences and woodpiles and fishnets. The curtains were still at the windows, there were still clotheslines in the side yards, the grass was green the flowers (all varieties which would be found in an English country garden--



lavender and daisies and nasturtiums) were in bloom, and there were hundreds of butterflies fluttering among the blossoms.



Across the Bywater you could see the Mill and the Green Dragon, and in the field below, the Party Tree stood. The Party Tree's real, and so were all the other trees in Hobbiton except for the one standing just above Bag End. That was constructed for THE LORD OF THE RINGS from a real tree which was cut down somewhere else, the pieces all numbered, and put together again on top of the hill, with artificial painted leaves put on it, just like in ALICE IN WONDERLAND. But by the time THE HOBBIT was filmed, it had pretty much fallen apart, so a completely artificial tree was constructed for this go-round.



The attention to detail on the tree and everything else was amazing, from the signposts to the lichen on the fence rails, and, in spite of all the tourists--who, of course were Tolkien geeks like us--it felt like we were really there in the Shire. And in Lothlorien. And the Misty Mountains. And Mordor. No wonder Peter Jackson wanted to film Middle Earth here--it is Middle Earth.

As witness the photographs below:



"In a hole in the ground lived a hobbit..."



"...the land was rich and kindly...farms, cornlands, vineyards, and woods...the Hobbits named it the Shire..."



"Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine trees, and the waterfalls, and explore the caves..."



"They came on unexpected valleys, narrow with deep sides, that opened suddenly at their feet, and they looked down surprised to see trees below them and running water at the bottom...gullies they could almost leap over but very deep with waterfalls in them..."



5.

"The Long Lake...was so wide that the opposite shores looked small and far, but it was so long that its northerly end, which pointed toward the Mountain, could not be seen at all."



"...it seemed as if darkness flowed out like a vapour from the hole in the mountain-side, and deep darkness in which nothing could be seen lay before their eyes, a yawning mouth leading in and down to Smaug's lair."



"Inside Bag End, Bilbo and Gandalf were sitting at the open window of a small room looking out west onto the garden. The late afternoon was bright and peaceful. The flowers glowed red and golden: snapdragons, and sunflowers, and nasturtiums wandering all over the turf walls and peeping in at the round windows..."



"...the hobbits woke to find the large field south of Bilbo's front door, covered with ropes and poles for tents and pavilions...there was a specially large pavilion, so big that the tree that grew in the field was right inside it..."



"...on that side they had built a hedge: the High Hay. It had been planted many generations ago, and was now thick and tall..."



"...Frodo looked up and saw leaning over him a huge willow-tree...its sprawling branches going up, like reaching arms with many long-fingered hands, its knotted and twisted trunk gaping..."



"...eastward the Barrow-downs rose, ridge behind ridge...a country of grass and short springy turf, silent except for the high lonely cries of birds..."



"...the land rode in wooded rides, green, yellow, russet under the sun, beyond which lay hidden the valley of the Brandywine..."



"the inn of Bree...in the big common-room of the inn...the light...came chiefly from a blazing log-fire, for the three lamps hanging from the beams were dim, and half-veiled in smoke..."



"Whatever danger may beset it, the Road is our only way to the Ford of Bruinen."



"Northward the dale ran up into a glen of shadows between two great arms of the mountains, above which three white peaks were shimmering: Celebdil, Fanuidhol, Caradhras, the mountains of Moria."



"...in the Mirrormere...they saw the forms of the encircling mountains mirrored in a profound hue, and the peaks were like plumes of white flame above them..."



"...the trees stood tall before them arching over the road and stream that ran suddenly beneath their spreading boughs...

there lie the woods of Lothlorien...the fairest of all the dwellings of my people..."



"...a wide ravine, with great rocky sides...Frodo, peering forward, saw in the distance two great rocks approaching...tall and sheer and ominous they stood upon either side of the stream. "Behold the Argonath, the Pillars of the Kings!" cried Aragorn."



"On either side...wide fens and mires now lay...mists curled and smoked from dark and noisome pools...the Dead Marshes..."



"...the Orcs came to a knoll...the eaves of the forest were very near... "We must get under cover," said Pippin...even as he spoke, the dark edge of the forest loomed up straight before them..."



"They had come to the desolation that lay before Mordor...the ash-heaps of the Dark Lord."



"...and the sails were drawn up, and the wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away down the long grey firth...and went out into the High Sea..."



"But Sam turned to Bywater, and so came back up the Hill...and he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within..."



"The road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began..."