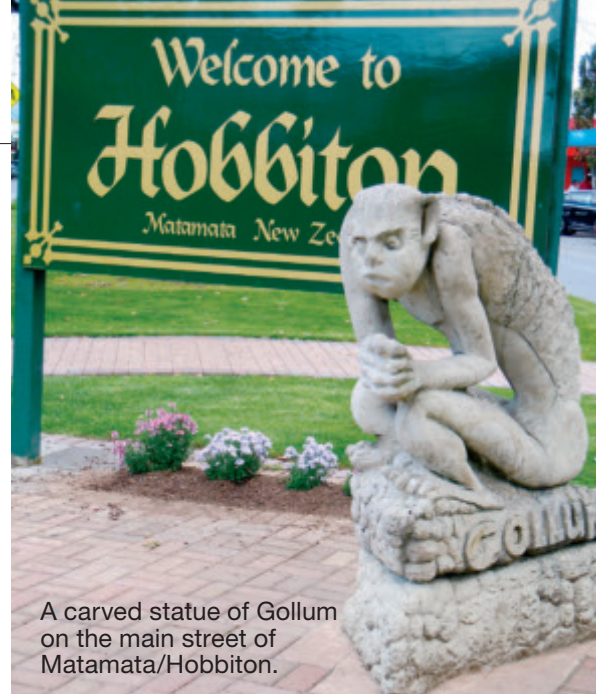




The lush rolling farmland near Matamata reminded Peter Jackson of “The Shire.”



A carved statue of Gollum on the main street of Matamata/Hobbiton.



“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.”



The movie set of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*.

It was a building unlike any we had ever seen. Grass grew on the roof and the archlike entry had a small portholelike window beside it. Then we spotted the two signs that explained it all: WELCOME TO HOBBITON and, beside the door:

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. — J. R. R. Tolkien”

We were in **Matamata**, New Zea-

land, the North Island agricultural town that came to fame when Sir Peter Jackson chose the film location for Hobbiton, the hometown of that famous adventurer Bilbo Baggins (and various other hobbit heroes). Jackson had searched from a low-flying helicopter until he finally found verdant farmland untouched by “20th-century clutter,” meaning roads, buildings, transmission towers, power lines, and wind farms. Near Matamata, on a working sheep and beef farm belonging to the Alexander family, a green hill with a big tree overlooking a little lake became Hobbiton.

It was Hobbiton during filming of the three *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) films and the three *The Hobbit* prequel movies: *An Unexpected Journey* (which opened in December), *The Desolation of Smaug* (December 2013), and *There and Back Again* (2014).

Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* in the early 1930s, and it was such a hit when it was published in 1937 that his publisher asked for a sequel, which grew into the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Jackson and company went at things the other way around, filming the LOTR movies mostly in 1999 and 2000, and *The*

*Hobbit* films in 2011 and '12. During filming, life on the farm continued, and the nearby town of Matamata, two hours south of Auckland, became a base for the movies' cast and crew.

It's hardly surprising that the lush farmland around Matamata reminded Jackson of Tolkien's Shire. Set amid gently rolling green hills, luxuriant pastures were filled with a dense bovine population grazing belly-deep in grass. The area is also famous for producing great racehorses.

Today a large carved statue of Gollum resides on Matamata's main street, and its

tourist office has everything a fan could ask for: LOTR clothes, books, photos, posters, and other souvenirs. You can also reserve a tour of Hobbiton. After filming wrapped up, Hobbiton became a tourist attraction, and visitors can take a peek inside the site's 44 hobbit holes. Tours also include the stone bridge, the

mill, and the Green Dragon pub. The hobbits' gardens even have five full-time gardeners, for hobbits like things neat and orderly. Couples can even book Hobbiton (well in advance) as a wedding site.

### Maori Heartland

This amazing country has more than Middle Earth wonders to explore. The previous day, north of Auckland, we'd seen the most unusual public toilets on the main street of **Kawakawa**. The building housing the washrooms had a garden roof and delightful colourful ceramic columns of flamboyant style. This was the final, wonderfully vibrant creation of Friedensreich Hundertwasser, the world-famous Austrian artist, architect, and ecologist who made New Zealand his home. We've certainly seen folks line up for the loo before—but never just to take photos.

Photos: Lindsey Editorial.

Photos: Fotolia/Dieter Kardi (houses); Courtesy of Tourism New Zealand/Ian Brodie (movie set).



Flamboyantly designed public-toilet building, by world-famous architect Hundertwasser.



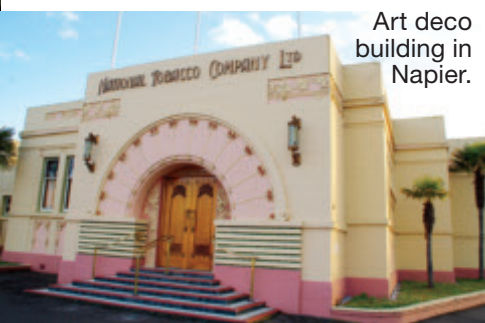
Waimangu Volcanic Valley.



Kawiti glow-worm cave entry.



Lake Spa at the Polynesian Spa, Rotorua.



Art deco building in Napier.



Polynesian Spa, Rotorua.

Photos: Lindsay Editorial (washrooms and cave); Lindsay Editorial (Lake Spa); Rotorua (Lake Spa).

Photos: Lindsay Editorial.

recently rejuvenated pedestrian mall lined with cafés, a steak house, and memorable local restaurants such as Lewishams (European dining) and Nuvolari (Italian).

This is also the heartland of the indigenous Maori, who have traditionally harnessed the local thermal energy to warm their homes and steam-cook food in earth ovens, pits dug into the ground. The Maori thermal village of Whakarewarewa in particular demonstrates this ancient innovation. Many hotels offer a *hangi* dinner (cooked in geothermal steam) accompanying a Maori stage show of local legends, music, and dance. Make a point of seeing the unforgettable *haka* (Maori war dance) at least once while in New Zealand.

Hiking in the **Waimangu Volcanic Valley**, 14 kilometres (9 miles)

south of Rotorua, was like stepping into a surreal scene from Tolkien's Middle Earth. And small wonder: this place was created overnight as if by wizardry when craters and thermal pools appeared in what had been a farm of rolling scrub-covered hills after a massive volcanic eruption in 1886. As we walked along one of the trails, steam rose from fissures in the ground and hot mud bubbled and boiled. Some small craters were still active, with steaming hot springs pouring over rocks, while other large craters had become cool reddish-brown, white, or emerald-green lakes.

The Thermal Explorer Highway, which we'd been following, now led farther southeast to **Napier**, a seaport famous for its remarkable art deco architecture and for playing host to the Canadian team during the Rugby

World Cup in 2011. That's not the only Canadian link: Victoria, BC, is one of Napier's three sister cities and, like Victoria, Napier enjoys a near-Mediterranean climate. The city is also known for gourmet food and wine, as it's on the edge of New Zealand's most diverse wine-producing region—Hawke's Bay, with more than 150 vineyards and 90 wineries. This region is also the country's largest apple, pear, and stone-fruit producer.

As we headed south on State Highway (SH) 2, passing through high country pastures, verdant river valleys, miles of vineyards, and fertile plains full of market gardens, we weren't surprised to see many red and yellow "Hawke's Bay Food Trail" signs.

We spent the next day driving over the mountains to the capital city, Wellington. We followed SH-2 along the