

HOBBIT TOURISM TO ATTRACT THOUSANDS OF VISITORS



New Zealand has been world-renowned as the site where parts of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth had become a reality, with its verdant grassland plains and forests giving the literary masterpiece a majestic portrayal as seen in the Lord of the Rings. Now, as the anticipated second Trilogy is about to unfold, tour operators are frantically preparing for another bonanza.

Last year New Zealand being the World Rugby Cup's host nation was a long way from the realization of a "stadium of four million", as envisioned by organizers. This year, the big event deviates from the usual hairy feet, with the opening of "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" due in few weeks.

Last week, the countdown for film adaptation of "The Hobbit" had begun, ten years after the huge global success of the movie trilogy of "Lord of the Rings". As if to emphasize the earnestness of this, the Mayor of Wellington, Celia Wade-Brown, uncovered a clock with epic proportions, with an image of Bilbo Baggins (portrayed by Martin Freeman), which has the sole purpose of informing everyone the minutes remaining before the anticipated movie's premiere on 28 November.

The Embassy Theatre has been chosen as the cinema that would host the screening, and on the day of the premiere, a host of stars (most probably led by Freeman) will be at Wellington, walking the prestigious 500m Courtney Place red carpet. This had been done last in 2003, in "The Return of the King", which is the final installment of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy. There had been more than 120,000 people who had arrived and watched this parade. Now, with The Hobbit's premiere at hand, the organizers are expecting a similar (if not better) turnout.

"100% Pure New Zealand", will become "100% Middle-Earth", and even Wellington will be known, as the "Middle of Middle-Earth", as stated by Wade Brown. Even though Tolkien had made his Middle-Earth in Oxfordshire in the late 30's, the cinematic Middle-Earth, as had been proven in the past decade, was hard to ignore.

Last week, New Zealand had released stamps and coins in commemoration of this glorious event, with the images of Freeman as Bilbo and Sir Ian McKellen as Gandalf. Each coin will have a value of NZ\$30 (L15) while \$10 coins in a set of three are retailed at about \$11,000 (L6,000).

As the Hobbit will surely be a big hit, the tourism companies whose specialties are primarily the Lord of the Rings locations in New Zealand, are expecting big business, since its peak at 2005 is a testament that the steady tourism will once again have a growth spurt with the advent of The Hobbit.

The Hobbiton Set and Farm tours will most certainly have the highest tourism boost, being the primary filming site of Jackson's movie adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic novels. Located in the peaceful town of Matamata, in the rural areas in the North Island Waikato region, this tourist destination is nestled in vastly undulating hills and enjoys an estimated visitor number of 20,000 tourists annually. This number is expected to double, at least, by the end of the year.

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