

The Wausau Area News & Entertainment Weekly

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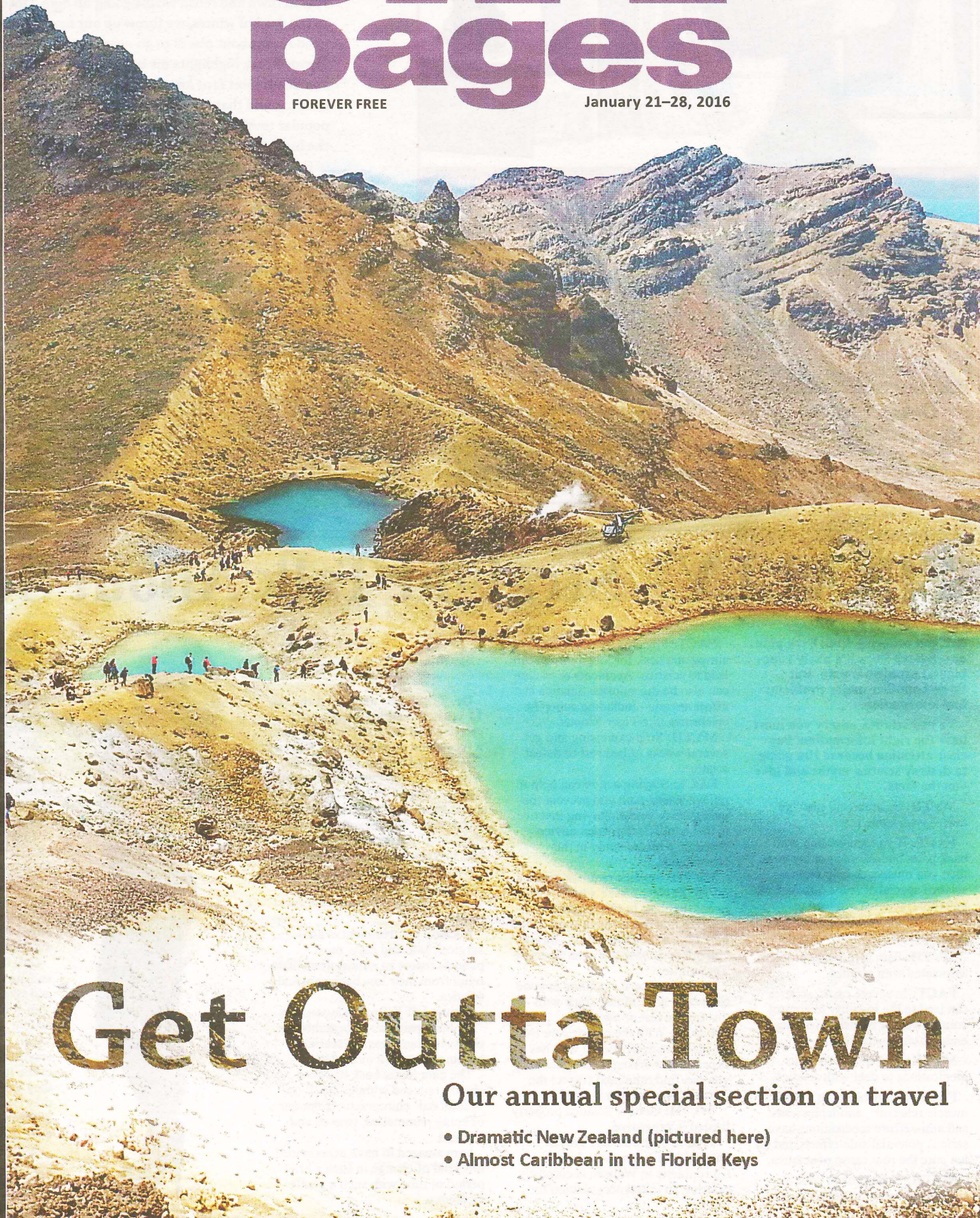
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Get Outta Town

Our annual special section on travel

- Dramatic New Zealand (pictured here)
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The Emerald Lakes of Tongariro National Park, a hiking gem and World Heritage site.
PHOTO BY TREVOR ROARK

Dramatic New Zealand

The *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* movies were made there for good reason, and have made this island country a tourist hot spot

by Trevor Roark

Middle Earth, a fictional world where Hobbits, Elves, Orcs, Men, Dwarves and the like dwell, isn't only a picturesque land in the minds of JRR Tolkien and Peter Jackson fans. It's an experience that travelers seek out every day in New Zealand.

The Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogies brought to life Tolkien's mythological good-versus-evil struggle to rule Middle Earth, and allowed director Peter Jackson to reveal the vivid beauty of his home country, New Zealand, where most of the movies were filmed.

Tourists from around the world now go there to see film locations such as Hobbiton, near Matamata in the North Island, and the river canyon of the mighty Pillars of the Kings scene (the Kawarau River near Queenstown in the South Island). I am no exception.

In 2004, two college friends and I set out on a month-long journey across New Zealand. After a lot of time on the plane—jumping from Chicago, to LAX to Fiji and finally landing in Auckland, New Zealand—we started our expedition with a small amount of savings, a rental car, and camping gear to catch sleep in random places, sanctioned or not.

Adjusting to New Zealand isn't difficult. The primary language is English and the climate is similar to the Midwest, though conveniently the seasons in the southern hemisphere are exactly opposite. When it's the dead of winter in Wisconsin, it's the height of summer in New Zealand.

The islands that comprise New Zealand—the main North and South islands and hundreds of smaller ones—were settled by Polynesians around 1250–1300 CE (becoming the Maori culture), though the next six centuries would give way to European colonization. Thus today, the majority of New Zealand's population is of European descent.

In total land area, New Zealand is slightly smaller than California and contains strikingly diverse landscapes within small areas—beaches, mountains, forests, lakes and rivers, gorges, glaciers and volcanoes.

Hiking is one of the most popular outdoor activities in New Zealand. One of these treks, The Alpine Crossing in Tongariro National Park (North Island), is a World Heritage site and renowned as one of the best day treks in New Zealand for its otherworldly terrain of mountains, volcano craters, hot

springs, green lakes and meadows. Tongariro was an obvious fit for us young vagabonds, yet the hike ended in a surprising way.

Hiking along this series of active volcanoes immersed me imaginatively in Mordor, the evil land within Middle Earth. Yes, this was a *Lord of the Rings*' film location, and the rigid landscape and dark red rocks made me feel like I was scaling Mount Doom (in real life, Tongariro's Mount Ngauruhoe and Mount Ruapehu). It was a somewhat intense experience physically and visually.

All of a sudden, the land gave way to openness and the blue-green Emerald Lakes, three round, brightly colored crater lakes nestled high in the volcanic terrain.

As we began the four-hour descent, we made small talk with a local named Carol. Upon reaching the trailhead, we discovered that we had missed the last shuttle back to our car at the other trail head. Carol came to the rescue, and the ride turned into a two-night stay on her sheep farm, when she turned to us and jokingly asked if we'd like to shear some sheep.

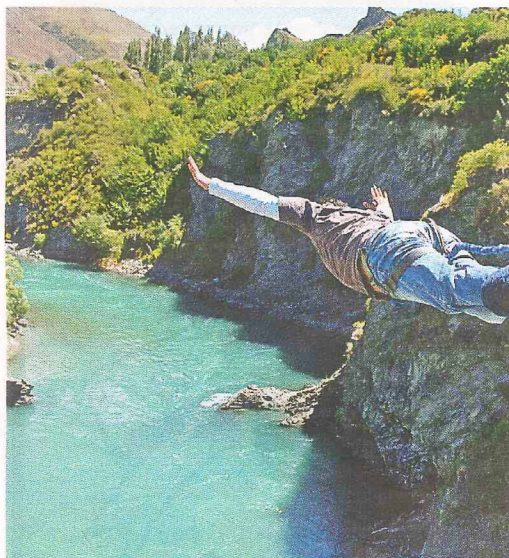
Camping out in her front yard and the excessive hospitality was a welcome arrangement. So were the home-cooked meals and cold bottles of beer in their fridge. We enjoyed those amenities for two evenings along with warm conversation with Carol, her son Tony, husband Eean, and a company of touring sheep shearers. Sheep shearing is a physically demanding profession, and in New Zealand, shearing teams (contractors) roam the country and set up at farms. This particular crew came by about twice a year to Carol's farm and were treated like family. The way Carol and her husband welcomed them into their home was similar to the kindness they showed to us.

The next morning we awoke to the sound of baaing and shearing in the barn. It was time to pay our dues. Watching these contractors work was an experience I'll never forget. The sweat soaking up their clothes and dripping off their faces told the story. The farmers entrusted us to the easier wool sweeping and packing duties, though we travelers each got a crack at shearing a sheep as the professionals guided us through the process.

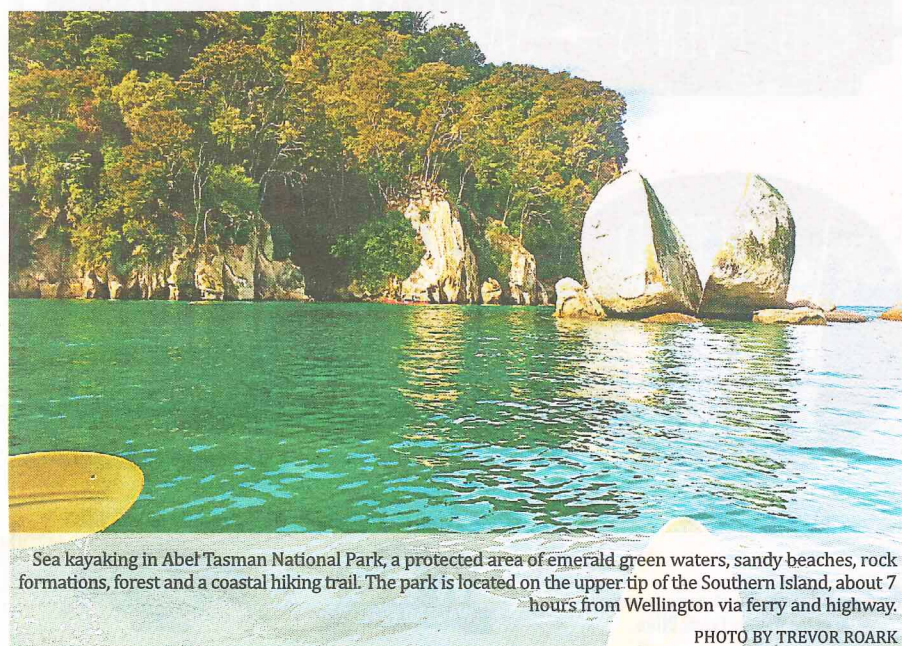
Carol's farm evolved into a perfect "off-the-tourist-path" experience.

Ten years later New Zealand called to me again, so I returned to lead a tour with my wife through, UWSP Adventure Tours, where I work. With a group of 23 travelers along with us, I was excited to share some of the same places I explored the last time as well as new ones: hiking the Tongariro Alpine Crossing again, spelunking in the Waitomo Caves (my first time), sea kayaking Abel Tasman National Park area, hiking near the foot of Mount Cook and plenty more.

Hobbiton Film Set was a highlight as well and deserves further description for all those *LOTR* and *Hobbit* fans reading this. The farmer who owns the land—it's a 1,250-acre sheep and beef farm—knows exactly what he's doing, so this popular tourist destination did not disappoint. It even impressed some of my group who had not previously seen the movies or read Tolkien.



Bungee jumping over the Kawarau River near Queenstown.
TOURISM NEW ZEALAND



Sea kayaking in Abel Tasman National Park, a protected area of emerald green waters, sandy beaches, rock formations, forest and a coastal hiking trail. The park is located on the upper tip of the Southern Island, about 7 hours from Wellington via ferry and highway.
PHOTO BY TREVOR ROARK

First of all, this permanent film set is truly a village—including a pub!—and much larger than I anticipated, with paths, roads and more than 40 hobbit hole houses plus the mill on the river. All along the grounds you'll find displays of merchant and farming objects such as pots, laundry on the line, wheelbarrows, etc. It's all very real, as are the arrays of vegetable and flower gardens throughout. These gardens are tended daily and vegetables are harvested throughout the season. The lush, green, beautiful rural landscape around and within Hobbiton alone is stunning.

Hobbiton most recently includes a full-scale, working version of the Green Dragon, a pub the hobbits frequented in the movies. For visitors it offers local microbrews and a full menu. Hobbiton also has a hefty visitor's center and gift shop, with hundreds of different souvenirs. One can purchase an exact replica of Gandalf's hat or the One Ring (including inscription).

Each Hobbiton employee rotates roles daily, from tending the gardens, to guiding a tour group through the footpaths, to serving cold ones at the Green Dragon. The only downside is that the place can be overrun with tourists depending on when you tour it.

The prevalent adventure tourism fits well into the "You only live once" (YOLO) theme one commonly hears in New Zealand. On that note, there's one more filming location that fits this jargon: The Pillars of the Kings scene in the first film/book (*The Fellowship of the Ring*), where the fellowship floats down river past two mighty statues flanking each bank.

To create the scene, highly detailed models were digitally combined with live action footage to make the monuments appear 300 feet tall. Of course, tourists can't see these statues at all, but the true awe is found in the Kawarau River anyway.

A deep, ragged canyon forms the sides of this river and gives way to a powerful, blue iridescent column of churning water. This river drains Lake Wakatipu at the city of Queenstown, and its striking blue color comes from glaciers that feed the lake.

People experience this river through riverboarding, jet boating, white water rafting, river surfing, and bungy jumping. Indeed, the world's first commercial bungy site is here, at the Kawarau Bridge Bungy, found near where the Pillars of the Kings scene was filmed. Called the "adventure capital of the world," Queenstown and bungy jumping at the Kawarau Bridge go hand in hand.

New Zealand would be a worthy addition to your bucket list. Whether you're a *Lord of the Rings/Hobbit* fan or not, you won't regret exploring this incredible country named Aotearoa in Maori, meaning the "land of the long white cloud." **CP**

Trevor Roark is the UW-Stevens Point Adventure Tours program manager

Good to know

Data/mobile: Much of New Zealand has WiFi and it's becoming increasingly free in public spaces and with accommodations. Cell phone use and coverage are very common as well.

Customs are strict when it comes to bringing food, plant, and animal matter into New Zealand. If you bring hiking boots, make sure no dirt is embedded in the soles, otherwise customs will remove the boots from your luggage or person and wash them for you.

Getting around: Tourism is one of the biggest economic drivers for New Zealand and it shows—this country guarantees traveler satisfaction. Renting a car or using public buses is the way to go. If interested in group packages and more amenities, then traveling via coach is best.

Fans of the LOTR and Hobbit movies should explore both North and South Islands to soak in all the sites, but this requires considerably more road miles. If pressed for time, consider that the Hobbiton movie set is only a two-and-a-half-hour drive southeast from Auckland, on the North Island. Drive another two and a half hours south from Hobbiton to reach Tongariro National Park.

Rooms on the road: Due to the films' popularity, it's not hard to find overnight accommodations near filming locations. Plenty of tour companies and guides can show you these sites and sometimes make a day of it. You can easily book accommodations prior to your arrival as well. There's a hotel within 15 minutes of Hobbiton, for example.

If you're not a fan and have limited time, consider flying directly to Christchurch or Queenstown on the South Island, which overall has more outdoor recreation and adventures.

Trevor's picks: Best places to recreate

Queenstown Adventure capital of the world, and your central point for bungee jumping, skydiving, river rafting and kayaking, mountain biking and hiking.

Abel Tasman National Park Best sea kayaking

Rotorua Maori cultural immersion and white water rafting

Wellington Public museum, and Peter Jackson's Weta Workshop, which offers public tours of the behind-the-scenes work creating props, costumes, sets and more.

Auckland City night life

Milford Sound Underwater observatory, sea cruise, waterfalls, and sea kayaking

Christchurch Gardens and learning about Antarctica at the Antarctic Center



The *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* film set depicting The Shire is a permanent attraction now, with tours, a fabulous gift shop and a replica of The Green Dragon pub that serves local microbrews and food. It's about 2.5 hour-drive from Auckland, with overnight accommodations nearby.

PHOTO BY TREVOR ROARK

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