

The home of Middle Earth

by Sue Burgin

In the heart of the Waikato is where you'll find Hobbiton, one of New Zealand's largest international and domestic tourist attractions.

More than half a million people a year visit this monument to Middle Earth just out of Matamata. "People grow up reading the books, then they watch the movies. It's a franchise that lives on and on," says General Manager, Shayne Forrest.

Building Hobbiton

The 12-acre site is the largest movie set ever constructed in the world. Shayne Forrest says the original movie set for Lord of the Rings was built in 2002 and was only ever going to be temporary.

"But in 2008, director Peter Jackson returned asking to use the land again for The Hobbit movies.

"This time, we went into business together reconstructing the LOTR site as a permanent Hobbiton set."

The Hobbits are gone – but their legacy remains

For the Hobbit trilogy only, the exteriors were used for the filming and interior shooting was done in studios elsewhere.

The interiors visitors explore today were designed by the original film designers, though, and are a very popular feature of the Hobbiton tours, according to Shayne.

A Hobbiton tour starts in Bagshot Row and finishes in the Green Dragon Inn, where visitors can relax with a genuine Hobbit Southfarthing brew.

The tour includes a coach ride from The Shire's Rest in Bagshot Road, Matamata, to Middle Earth, but once there, it's a walking tour that starts with a welcome from Director Peter Jackson, who shares a few behind-the-scenes secrets.

Suitable for everyone

Shayne says tours are suitable for everyone, with carts that can be booked ahead for anyone with mobility issues.

The tours start every 10 minutes and operate in all weathers.

Hobbiton is open every day of the year except for Christmas Day.

Many special events are also hosted there, including Hobbit Day, Hobbit Christmas and a Hobbit Beer Festival. These special events do need to be booked 12 months in advance.

There's also a very popular lantern-lit evening Banquet Tour, which Shayne says is very special.

More information on booking your Hobbiton tour can be found at www.hobbitontours.co.nz

Photos this page and right: Hobbiton is open every day of the year except Christmas Day. Photos supplied.

