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On the trail of *The Last Samurai* (II): Hobbiton vs Uruti Valley

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Abstract: This research note is part two of a three-part series documenting fieldwork at sites related to the 2003 film *The Last Samurai*. The ‘failure’ of *Last Samurai* tourism at shooting locations in Taranaki has often been contrasted with the success of tourism in New Zealand relating to *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Based on fieldwork at Hobbiton in August 2017, this research note identifies the main reasons why Hobbiton became a popular tourist attraction with up to 3000 visitors per day in 2016-2017, while by the same time *Last Samurai* tourism had effectively ceased to exist. The reasons for Hobbiton’s ‘success’, by contrast, are identified as a reason why *Last Samurai* sites might remain attractive for film tourists, while Hobbiton has lost much of its appeal for film tourism purists.

アブストラクト：本研究ノートは、2003年公開の映画『ラストサムライ』に関連する場所でのフィールドワーク記録を、3編の連続する研究ノートとしてまとめたうちの「その2」である。『ラストサムライ』のロケ地であるタラナキにおける『ラストサムライ』ツーリズムの「失敗」事例は、しばしば、同じくニュージーランドの事例である『ロード・オブ・ザ・リング』と『ホビット』に関連するツーリズムの「成功」と比較される。本研究ノートでは、2017年8月に実施したホビトンでの現地調査に基づき、『ラストサムライ』関連のツーリズムが明らかに下火になってしまった一方で、ホビトンが、2016年から2017年現在も、1日当たり最大3千人訪問する人気のツーリストアトラクションになり得ているのは何故なのか、その主たる理由について検討を行う。その一方で、ホビトンの「成功」理由は、フィルムツーリズム上の魅力の多くを失ったことが逆に作用した点にあり、この点において、『ラストサムライ』ロケ地は依然としてフィルムツーリストに対して魅力を維持し続けている可能性があることについても論じる。

Keywords: film tourism, contents tourism, *The Last Samurai*, *Lord of the Rings*, Hobbiton.

Introduction

In August 2017 I did fieldwork at two sites of film tourism in New Zealand: sites relating to *The Last Samurai*, which was filmed in Taranaki early in 2003 (Seaton 2019a), and Hobbiton in Matamata, which has become a well-known example of a highly successful film tourism attraction. Visiting these two sites back to back (on 8 and 10 August respectively) provided an insightful

comparison between the failure to develop sustainable *Last Samurai* tourism in Taranaki and the commercial success of Hobbiton. However, as both a researcher and a film tourist, my levels of enjoyment and engagement were inversely related to the commercial success of the sites. I enjoyed and gained considerably more from my day in Taranaki than from my visit to Hobbiton. This is a common issue in tourism, namely that successful commercialization of a tourism resource diminishes its appeal to many travelers, while the most meaningful tourism experiences occur in places where the tourism industry has little obvious presence.

This phenomenon is of particular importance in film tourism, where an important category of tourist is the fan. Fans are people who make considerable time, financial and emotional investments in a particular phenomenon, whether it be a sports team, an artist, or work of popular culture. The primary characteristics of a fan are active rather than passive engagement with the phenomenon, and an awareness that being a fan constitutes both a longterm commitment and a significant part of the individual's identity. I would not categorize myself as a fan of *The Lord of the Rings*. I have seen, but did not particularly enjoy, the *Lord of the Rings* films. Neither have I read the J.R.R. Tolkien novels or seen *The Hobbit* trilogy. However, as a researcher of contents tourism I am interested in the dynamics of the *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon. I more closely fit the definition of a fan regarding *The Last Samurai*. I have viewed the film on multiple occasions, although my attraction to the film is more professional than personal. Rather than a film that I watch for entertainment and relaxation, it is a film I have used as an educator to stimulate class discussion about the differences between screen history and actual history, and to introduce themes within film tourism. Nevertheless, with a detailed knowledge of the film's plot based on multiple viewings, I was able to engage in fannish behaviours such as identifying and seeking out exact locations and shooting angles for specific scenes in the film during my tour of *Last Samurai* sites (Seaton 2019a).

Tourism at Hobbiton and the samurai mountain village site in the Uruti Valley form an interesting comparison and have often been analyzed in tandem (for example, Beeton 2005; Leotta 2011; Buchmann 2014). Both are on privately-owned farmland. Both farming families that own the land made concerted efforts to turn the site into a commercial film tourism attraction. Both are in stunning rural settings. Both locations have important roles to play in their respective stories as 'spiritual homes' for the main characters. And both date from around 2003 as film tourism sites at a time when the New Zealand government was actively backing film production in the country. However, one farm became a massive attraction with up to 3,000 paying visitors per day in 2016-2017, while the other saw dozens of visitors on good days in the year or two after the film's release before demand collapsed entirely. This research note identifies some of the reasons for these contrasting fortunes based on my observations at the two sites.

Visiting Hobbiton: 10 August 2017

I took the day-return tour to Hobbiton from Auckland on 10 August 2017. My intercity bus left central Auckland early in the morning. This connected with the shuttle bus in central Matamata (from outside the visitor centre) to Hobbiton, from where I transferred onto one of the guided tours around the movie set in a group of about twenty people. The entire tour ran to a rigid schedule, unlike my experience in Taranaki, on which I was the only person taking a customized tour. The guide taking us around the Hobbiton set on foot gave us information about the shooting of the films. While the guide gave the impression of being a knowledgeable fan of the films, the tour itself followed a set path and, one assumes, narration. Our tour ended in a restaurant/pub where we could sample the local beer. At the end of my guided tour, I was taken by shuttle bus back to the gift shop,

where I had ten minutes to do some shopping before getting the shuttle bus to Matamata and the intercity bus back to Auckland.



Figure 1: Hobbiton



Figure 2: The Green Dragon

The tour might be popular with sightseers, but it can be a disappointment to film tourists. Sue Beeton compares her visits to Hobbiton in 2003, 2006 and 2014 and contrasts the run-down remnants of the set on her first visits with the smart ‘theme park’ appearance of the site in 2014. After the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the Alexander family, who own the farm, had not been allowed to do work on the *Lord of the Rings* set, but for *The Hobbit* trilogy the sets were constructed with the intention of them being used as a tourist site after the filming. Beeton comments: ‘On my most recent visit I found that I was not required to use my imagination or even “think” about the story and the remarkable creation and transformation that had taken place. To me, this is no longer a place for film fans’ (Beeton 2016, p. 127). These sentiments were inadvertently validated by our tour guide when she said that only about forty per cent of visitors to Hobbiton have actually seen the films. In other words, Hobbiton has become a stop on a sightseeing tour, or just ‘one of the things to do in New Zealand’. Many of the visitors are on package tours, either from abroad (Hobbiton employs a number of Chinese guides to give tours to the many Chinese tourists) or run domestically

(the standard package includes Hobbiton and Rotorua). A telltale indicator of the site's transformation from film set to theme park was the photographic behaviour of visitors. Rather than recreating scenes from the films, visitors posed for group photos in front of the sights, a style of photography more consistent with the sightseer than the fan (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Visitors pose for a group photo in front of a Hobbit hole.

Hobbiton is undoubtedly a pretty corner of the world, but perhaps the main 'movie magic' left there is the ability to turn what are effectively landscaped gardens with a pub into a site that can charge an entry fee of NZ\$80 and still attract 3,000 people a day. The commercial success of Hobbiton illuminates the reasons why the *Last Samurai* sites foundered as a commercial venture, and also why the *Last Samurai* sites appealed to me as a film tourist while Hobbiton did not. Rather than identifying one primary factor, on the basis of my observations at both sites I attribute the different commercial potentials to a complex combination of factors.

- 1) *Accessibility*: As Buchmann (2014) noted, Hobbiton is positioned near the main highway connecting Auckland and Rotorua. It is a good stopover point between other attractions and is therefore easily incorporated into package tours of the North Island. Uruti Valley, by contrast, is much harder to access and does not benefit from passing traffic. Accessibility facilitates casual visitation among people with low motivations to visit specifically a film site, while inaccessibility restricts film tourism to the more purposeful tourist or fan.
- 2) *Shooting location vs runaway location*: *Lord of the Rings* is a fantasy set in Middle Earth. There is no real Middle Earth, but if there is a model then the clues come from J.R.R. Tolkien's own life. After being born in South Africa, he grew up near Birmingham and spent much of his life in Oxford ('Middle England'). The hobbit village is called 'the Shire'. Tolkien told his publisher the Shire was like a Warwickshire village around the time of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, i.e. 1897 (Sandbrook 2015, p. 363). In topographical, cultural and atmospheric terms, such a place can be recreated convincingly in New Zealand. The atmosphere of Hobbiton blends into Matamata and beyond to the rest of the North Island/Middle Earth. By contrast, Uruti Valley stands in for Japan, which is a real and very different place. However well the set construction crew and special effects team managed to create Japan in New Zealand for the film, as Beeton (2005, p. 241) noted, the fascination with a runaway location is in how the filmmakers convince us we are in Japan on screen when we are really in New Zealand. Standing in Uruti as a tourist, it is hard to feel immersed in the atmosphere of the film (Japan) in the way that one can be 'in Middle Earth' by being in Matamata.

- 3) *National vs regional branding*: With shooting locations all over the country, New Zealand could engage in national branding as 'Middle Earth'. Furthermore, there was no real Middle Earth to compete with the screen Middle Earth for authenticity in the minds of fans. By contrast, filming for *The Last Samurai* was in Taranaki, so branding could only be at a local level. Furthermore, Taranaki stood in for Japan. There was the risk of downgrading the local icon (Mt Taranaki) to being a substitute for another's national icon (Mt Fuji). The considerable difference in brand power feeds into the power of the films to induce tourism.
- 4) *Series of works vs a stand-alone film*: *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are a series of successful films based on a highly popular set of novels (and there is also a 1978 animated film of *Lord of the Rings*). In other words, they are a set of contents creating a 'narrative world'. *The Last Samurai*, by contrast, was a one-off film. A set of contents is released over a much longer timeframe. *The Hobbit* was first published in 1937 and has stood the test of time by being in print ever since. The *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* films were released over a period of more than a decade (2001-2014). This sustained public attention in the narrative world (rather than an individual work) is a vital component of a sustainable site of contents tourism. By contrast, while *The Last Samurai* was immensely popular in its release year, it did not generate sustained attention. As an ephemeral work in the public imagination, the sustainability of its related tourist sites was always more likely to be ephemeral, too.
- 5) *Cinematic adaptation of a novel vs an original screenplay*: It is a characteristic of many of the most durable film tourism locations that the films are based on successful novels. Jane Austen's works, the Harry Potter series and *The Hobbit/Lord of the Rings* are all examples of novels with large fandoms prior to them being adapted successfully for the screen and generating film tourism. When literary tourism overlaps with film tourism in this way, they combine to strengthen the tourism-inducing effect of the contents. By contrast, novelizations of an original screenplay (even if they exist, and there is not one for *The Last Samurai*) are typically sold as a spin-off product rather than constituting a formative part of the narrative world. There is rarely any synergy between the film and book in terms of contents tourism effects when the film comes first.
- 6) *Fantasy vs history*: *Lord of the Rings* is fantasy. There were no actual sites related to the story, only the filming locations. All film-induced tourism, therefore, must go to the shooting locations or sites relating to J.R.R. Tolkien in England, such as Sarehole Mill near Birmingham which is associated with the author and hosts the Middle Earth Festival each year. By contrast, *The Last Samurai* was loosely based on actual history. Film-induced tourism may exist at the shooting locations, but is concentrated at the heritage sites associated with that history. This is the phenomenon described in the third research note of this series (Seaton 2019b).
- 7) *Two bites at the cherry vs one*: The last issue that emerges from the comparison of Hobbiton and Uruti Valley is the element of repeated opportunity. In the aftermath of the *Lord of the Rings* films (2001-2003) there were legal barriers to commercially exploiting the site. The sets were removed, but the site still exhibited some potential as a tourist site for film fans. Without the second set of films, the *Hobbit* trilogy (2012-2014), tourism would have been limited to the tens of thousands of film fans that visited the site each year from around 2004 to 2010. Nevertheless, this was sufficient to indicate future tourism potential if a new set was constructed. Before the filming of the *Hobbit* trilogy, the Alexander family negotiated with the production company to leave the set in place. This enabled the creation of a film set tourist attraction of marketable authenticity and visual quality, even if it lost something for film fans by becoming a 'theme park'. This second bite at the cherry enabled the operation to shift from one attracting tens of thousands of tourists a year to one attracting hundreds of thousands per year.

The Radcliffes in Uruti Valley, by contrast, did not have the benefit of this second chance. They had not negotiated rights in advance of production, and so the sets were removed after the film was made. With no sequel to *The Last Samurai*, there was no opportunity to negotiate the survival of the set as a tourist attraction.

Conclusions

What emerges, therefore, is that while there are some basic practical reasons that Hobbiton became more sustainable (site accessibility, branding power, the ability to negotiate copyrights, and the survival of the actual filming set), the reasons for Hobbiton's success and Uruti Valley's failure in commercial terms seem to lie more in the nature of the contents and the relationship between the story and the filming locations. This conclusion about the primacy of the contents is borne out through comparison with the tourism induced by *The Last Samurai* in Japan, which is the topic of the third research note in this series.

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