

Travel



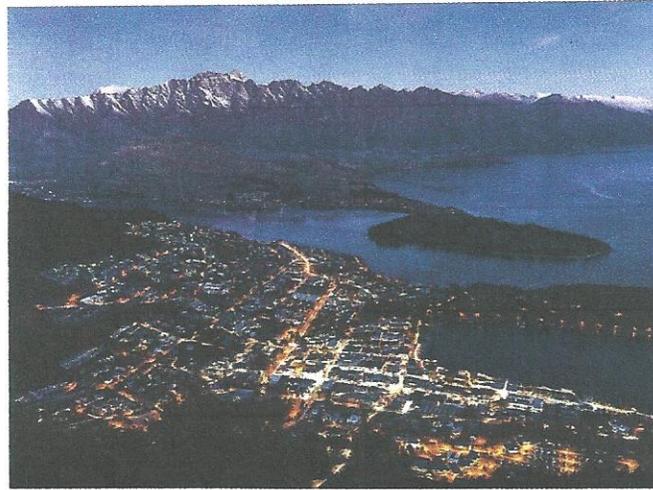
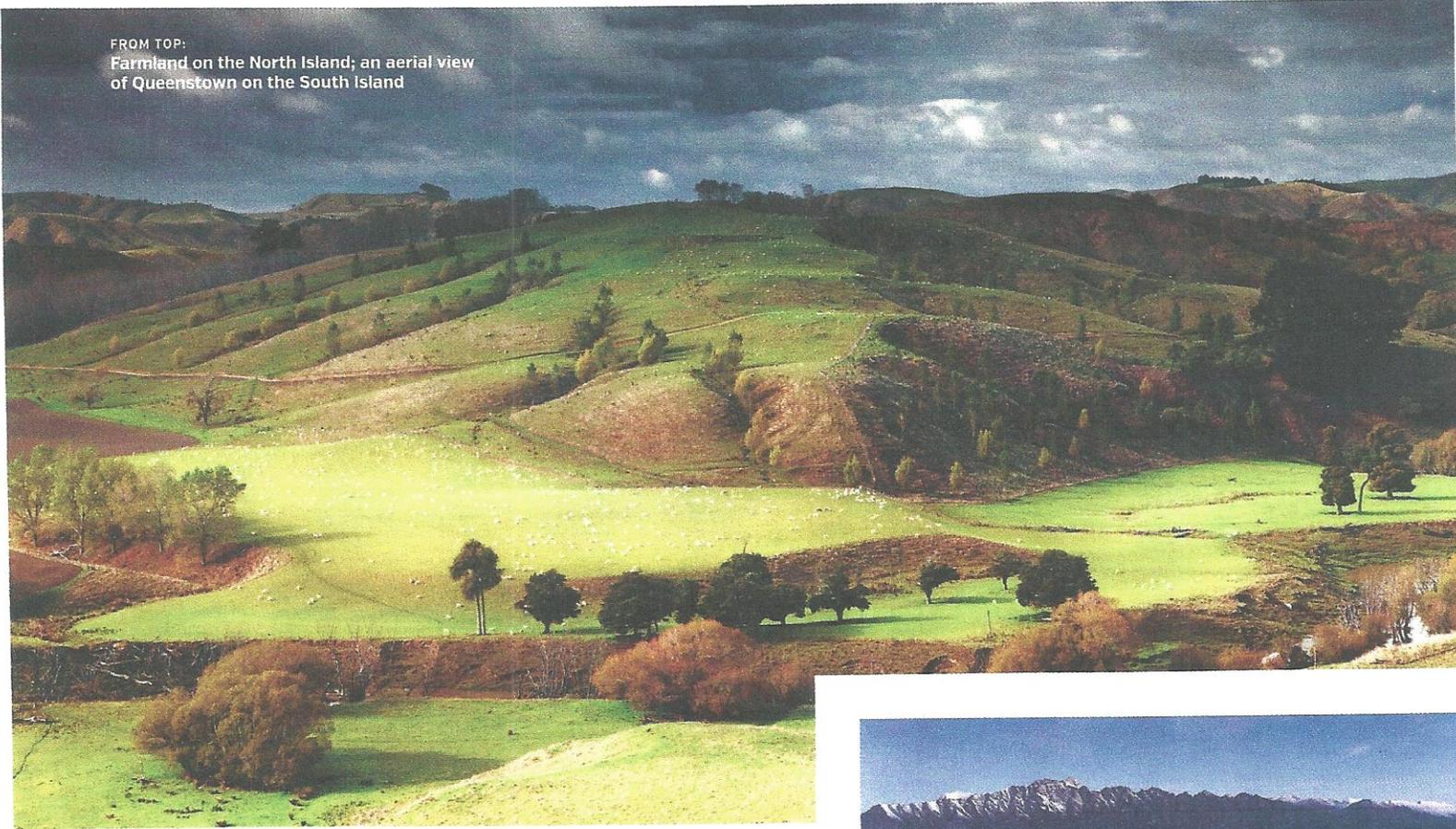
HOW PRECIOUS

Tour the Hobbit Houses and other notable *Lord of the Rings* movie sets in New Zealand.

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PHOTO BY SARA CORNIE

FROM TOP:
Farmland on the North Island; an aerial view
of Queenstown on the South Island



HOBBIT HABITAT

Explore New Zealand, the scenic, mythical island where the *Lord of the Rings* movie series was filmed

BY BECCA HENSLEY

As it turns out, Middle-earth is real. At least, it feels that way while traversing **New Zealand**. It's easy to picture elves, hobbits and trolls hiding in the shadows of the soaring mountains, grassy tussocks, pink-sanded beaches, craggy canyons and pine tree-rimmed sea cliffs here. And although I don't see any of these magical beings as I trudge through this captivating island nation, their presence is palpable in the mystical allure of the landscape.

The affable New Zealand locals, nicknamed Kiwis, are not characters clamoring to reclaim the Lost Dwarf Kingdom. Rather, they are earthy humans with a penchant for extreme sports, straight talk and winemaking. They welcome visitors like clansmen

into their storybook land. Whether it's a chef cooking with local ingredients, an athlete trekking a winding coastal trail or a farmer tending to his sheep, the Kiwis root deeply into this soul-gripping terrain. And they don't take it for granted. Can you imagine a better name

Insider Tips

Grab a meal at Fergburger in Queenstown, famous for its 20 different burgers served with your choice of fries, onion rings or squid pieces.

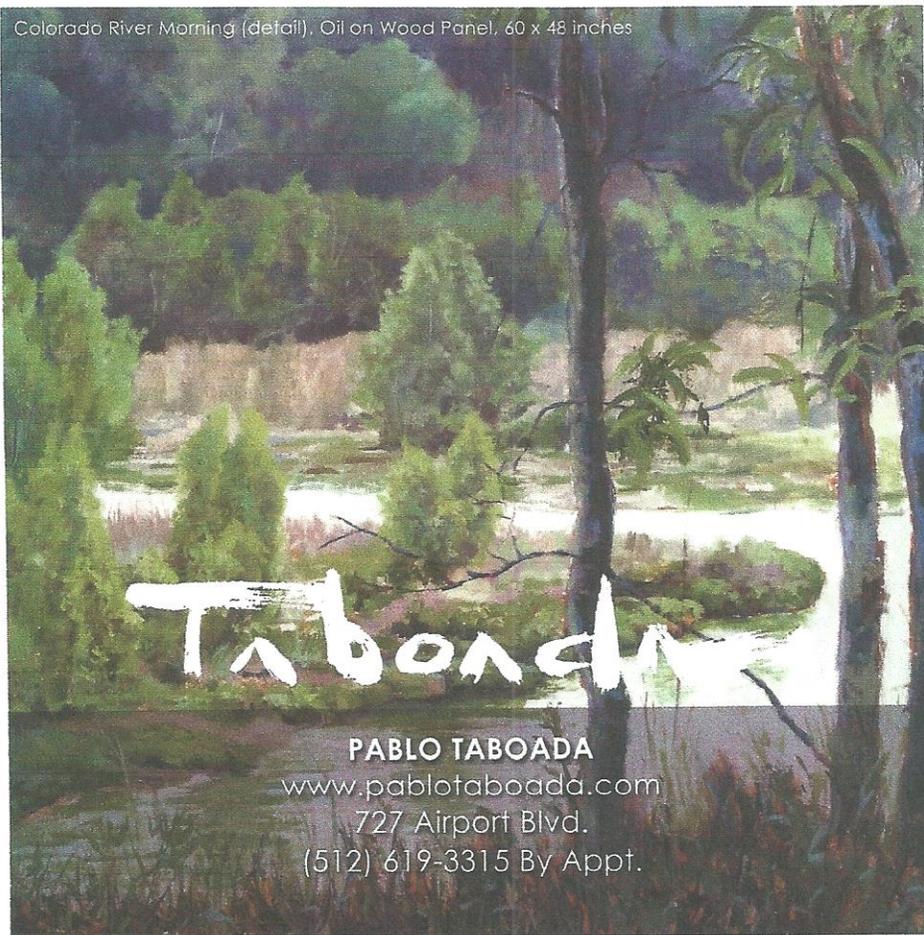
With more than 100 vineyards and 80 wineries, Hawke's Bay is best known for Bordeaux-blend reds and smooth chardonnays.

for a jaw-dropping mountain range than **The Remarkables**? The name sounds like something from J.R.R. Tolkien himself.

I begin my visit near these mountains on the **South Island**. Edging the **Otago**, a winemaking region praised for its pinot noirs, this area may be best known as the birthplace of commercial bungee-jumping. But when I check into **Matakauri Lodge**, just a few minutes from quirky **Queenstown**, I see a couple taking a leap of another sort. On a grassy knoll hovering above **Lake Wakatipu**, with The Remarkables' jagged

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Colorado River Morning (detail), Oil on Wood Panel, 60 x 48 inches



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TRAVEL
FAR

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peaks and the lake's glassy immensity behind, this bride and groom have picked the ideal spot for their nuptials.

An intimate Relais & Chateaux getaway, which recently hosted Prince William and Kate Middleton, the lodge exudes charm and comfort. Spacious cottage-like rooms have patios so you can begin your day awestruck by the view, and soaking tubs with panoramic windows ensure that you end it that way, too. The lodge's complimentary cocktail hour brings guests together to mingle and share their travel tips and experiences of the day before they retire to individual tables to eat dinner and admire the scenery outside.

Later, when I travel to **Hawke's Bay** on the eastern coast of New Zealand's **North Island**, I finally do meet an enchanted creature: an endangered kiwi bird. On the vast compound of **The Farm at Cape Kidnappers**, a sister property to Matakauri Lodge, I accompany a scientist through a dense, wooded landscape in search of the semi-nocturnal bird. A coterie of them are protected in a reserve, which is part of the hotel's 6,000 acres. It's the scientist's job to weigh and monitor the bird, which is wearing a transmitter. Once we find it, using a sci-fi-worthy GPS device, I am allowed to pet his fur-like feathers and feed him a worm snack for his dinner before we leave him amid his domicile of underbrush.

Later in the day, I hike through the property's world-renowned, par-71 marvel of a seaside golf course. As a duffer, I can't fully appreciate the challenges of these greens, with their cliff-tilting terrain, deep ravines and perilous cliff-to-cliff drives, but the beauty dazzles me. As I trek toward the Pacific Ocean, I come across sheep and cows aplenty before arriving at a beach that hosts the world's largest mainland colony of gannets. With pale gold crowns agleam, these magnificent birds could very well be characters from the chronicles of Middle-earth. Or perhaps that's just the magic of New Zealand. ■