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Movie News

## An Unexpected Journey: Quint on the set of The Hobbit! Part 1 - Concerning Hobbiton

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Ahoy, squirts! [Quint](#) here currently writing from the overgrown wilds of New Zealand's North Island. I've been rather secretive about my trip to the southern hemisphere and for that I apologize, but it had to be done.

Here's the deal. I'm kicking off a new, temporary, regular column that I'm calling An Unexpected Journey because that's exactly what it is. A little over a month ago an email arrived asking of my interest in embedding myself on the set of The Hobbit for the entirety of their location shoot, spending over 2 months in New Zealand rolled in with the crew and writing up their adventures, hassles, triumphs and tribulations as they traveled all over the country shooting bits and pieces from the upcoming two-parter prequel to Lord of the Rings. As Winston Zeddemore taught us all, the answer to this kind of question is always YES!

Calling The Hobbit a prequel doesn't exactly feel right, though. This isn't a film cooked up to cash in on an absurdly successful franchise. As most Tolkien readers and human beings over the age of 7 know, The Hobbit burst forth from the pen of JRR Tolkien first. There are many Middle Earth stories, but The Hobbit is the natural choice. It's high adventure and lets us revisit some of our favorite locations and characters within its own, unique story.

Case in point, the very first location visited on this trip: Matamata, Waikato, New Zealand – North Island, also known as Hobbiton.





Gorgeous, isn't it? As amazing as it looks in those pictures or in the movies there's something incredibly surreal and humbling to stand ON TOP of Bag End and overlook The Shire. I love (good) CGI, I have a lot of respect for the digital artists that toil away for hours and days and weeks and months in a dark room so we can go to Ancient Greece or Pandora or spend some time with Jurassic Park dinosaurs or Gollum or Caesar or those fookin' prawns, but if there was ever a shred of doubt that real wins it was obliterated as the sheep bayed, horses neighed, wind blew and smoke started pouring out of hobbit hole chimneys dotting the lush green landscape in the valley below me.



And when I say green I mean GREEN. The grass in this North Island New Zealand farmland is like Wizard of Oz Technicolor. It's so bright it almost hurts the eyes.

But we all know New Zealand is beautiful. That's a given at this point. By the end of December you'll be given your fill of unbelievable scenery images as I travel from location to location (especially when I hit the South Island). Let's get into what was actually happening in Hobbiton.

Wake up time was 5:15am, which barely gave me enough time to get showered and presentable before making the 40+ minute drive

from my Hamilton hotel to the location deep in the rolling green hills of Matamata.

Once past security I found myself driving along a small dirt and gravel road following signs to crew parking. Sure enough, the countryside was beautiful and Tolkeinesque, but it wasn't until I made a turn and saw the incredibly iconic stone bridge leading to The Green Dragon that it really struck me where I was.

That feeling intensified standing at base camp, perched on top of Bag End, looking over Hobbiton with dozens of Hobbit holes laid out over acres of green hills and the massive party tree anchored in the middle of everything.

The crew was setting up a crane out on the narrow walkway in front of Bag End for their first shot actually in Hobbiton in over 10 years. Because of the narrow and steep path down, the crew had to bring crane parts down and assemble much of it there. It took a little while, but before too long the familiar circular green front door of Bag End cracked open and out stepped an even more familiar face.

Munching on jellied toast, Frodo Baggins sauntered out and hopped down the steps leading to the mailbox, grabbed some mail and headed back inside.



What's Frodo doing in The Hobbit? I don't want to spoil too much, but I can say that Frodo is part of the connecting tissue between The Hobbit and Fellowship of the Ring.

In fact, the next shot was an over the shoulder on Elijah Wood hammering a sign up on Bag End's front gate: "No Admittance Except On Party Business." You guys should have an idea where that puts this moment in the timeline.

Martin Freeman stood in for Ian Holm, who shot all of his scenes and close-ups in London. They would sometimes play footage they've already shot to remind themselves of what they had done previously and to help them match up shots. Peter and crew did that for these reverse shots on Elijah and I got to see Ian as Bilbo once again. It was quite extraordinary, actually. Seeing Ian in close up, wearing the wig, the vest and the pointy ears just put a smile on my face.

While I didn't talk to Elijah about it, I bet it meant the world to him to have Martin there actually giving a performance for him to act off of. Freeman even adopted a little bit of Ian Holm's speech patterns for these scenes and was so good at impersonating Ian Holm that more than once I wondered if the voice I was hearing over the coms was Ian's on playback or Martin's in real life. Usually in these situations they'll have the script girl or one of the dialect coaches read the lines and while that works a charm, there's something extra special about a performer giving a performance. Like I said, I didn't talk to Elijah about it, but I bet he appreciated Martin doing that for him.

Their conversation is about Gandalf and if Bilbo thinks Gandalf will show up. Bilbo says "He wouldn't miss a chance to let off his whiz-poppers. He'll put on quite a show, you'll see," and Frodo grins, saying he's going to go surprise him and bounds off down the path like a kid at Christmas. When I say he bounds down the path that's not an exaggeration for illustrative purposes. He was damn near skipping, a glimpse of that pre-ring Frodo we meet in Fellowship.

After Frodo leaves the frame is very wide featuring The Shire in all its glory; The Green Dragon and mill smack dab in the middle.



It's my understanding this shot will transition to "60 Years Earlier" with Young Bilbo sitting in front of Bag End contently smoking a pipe and casually blowing smoke rings as Gandalf comes along and presents him with his adventure.

At lunch I caught up with Elijah who was wide-eyed and smiling, obviously enjoying being back in Hobbiton with the furry feet on. He ran off and I said, "Where do you think you're going?" His reply: "Back to Bag End, my friend!"

I had to run over to wardrobe to get fitted for my cameo the next day, but soon made my way back to set. We had the same scene going and this time they had the camera tight on Frodo. While it was a tighter shot than before, it still captured the landscape behind him. I mean, that's the whole reason we were out there in the first place, so I wasn't going to see a whole lot of close-ups and insert shots being filmed. In this case, it was a full on front shot of Frodo, the massive Party Tree behind him.

Seeing the footage of Ian as Old Bilbo was crazy, but nothing compared to seeing Elijah as Frodo in the furry-footed flesh. I've gotten to know Elijah pretty well over the last 13 years and it was the very definition of surreal talking to Frodo. Not Elijah. Frodo. I was literally not talking to a friend, but a fictional character, not to mention the magnifier of actually seeing him in Hobbiton.



I have to talk about the livestock. This will be the first time I've traveled internationally where I will have to check off the Yes box when asked if I've been near livestock on the arrival card. All forms of livestock were on set. There was even a runaway cow who decided she didn't like the film business on the first take and bolted right the hell out of Hobbiton.

It was quite funny, actually. I feel bad for the production having to pause, but from my high-up point of view (remember I was standing on top of the hill overlooking Hobbiton this whole day) it was very entertaining watching this cow haul ass along the path between the hobbit holes with a poor A.D. running about 20 feet behind her, desperately trying to catch up.

There were all manner of animals on the set ranging from goats to roosters, pigs, oxen, horses and all of them had handlers there to make sure they were fed, watered and safely munching on the lush green grass of Matamata. They would quickly duck out of frame whenever shots would go up.

Shortly after getting the shot on Frodo the unmistakable sound of chopper blades hit our ears. It was circling us. Obviously someone had hired it to fly above and take photos of the set.

An hour or two later a small, single-engine prop plane did the same thing, flying low and circling. Photos hit the net shortly after, I noticed. The crew was quite annoyed, not because Hobbiton was being exposed to the world, but because the choppers and planes were constantly getting in the shot and the sound of the engines was either ruining takes or making the production halt until they got out of earshot... which could be a long while if they are circling.

So, it was an unwanted intrusion, especially frustrating when you consider they were already waiting for the light to be right, to get behind a cloud or peak out from behind a cloud depending on the previous shot.

It got to the point that producer Zane Weiner asked me to take a photo of the plane so we can try to get its tail number. I had the 18mm-55mm lens on my camera (which means it's a shorter lens and doesn't zoom in too far), so I ran back to my bag, grabbed my 200mm lens and popped it on, but I was too late. The plane had already gone. Zane wanted me to let you guys know I failed at that particular task. And on my first day of location reporting, too.

That was one day of location shooting on The Hobbit. One day down, two months to go! Before I conclude this article, I'd like to set up a little space where I'll be featuring a member of the crew. God willing I'll be able to do this with each of my pieces, introducing you to the fine folks who I spend my days with. These guys are the unsung heroes of filmmaking, so I feel they should be represented.

Kicking things off will be Kiran Shah.



If you've watched the appendices on the Extended Editions of the Lord of the Rings films you should recognize Kiran's name. He's a much loved character around the set. He's an actor, stunt man and scale double. On Rings he doubled Elijah Wood, but before Lord of the Rings he had a massive career.

For instance, he's in Raiders of the Lost Ark... he's the guy who brings the poisoned dates into Indy and Sallah. He doubled Short Round in Temple of Doom, he was a character in Ridley Scott's Legend (Blunder) and even knew Stanley Kubrick.

The story he told me was that he got to know Kubrick a little bit, but even being on friendly terms with the maestro didn't save him when he popped in for a visit on the set of Eyes Wide Shut. Stanley spotted him and said, "Kiran, out!" We all know the stories about how Kubrick didn't like a lot of crew around and that was Kiran's little tale about it.

He also mentioned that LOTR and Hobbit illustrator/designer Alan Lee did the character designs for Legend and even drew the character that Shah ended up playing to look just like him. Shah attributes getting the role to Lee because he remembered auditioning for it and seeing Ridley Scott do a double take when Shah entered the room, looking back at the character design and up at him again.

In The Hobbit, Shah is up to his usual shenanigans, making the crew (and visiting movie geek reporters) crack up in-between takes and doubling hobbits. In the above picture he's waiting to double Martin Freeman's Bilbo, which is why his eyes are reverse raccooned in his picture. There's an eerie silicone mask of Bilbo's face that he'll put on when Bilbo is needed to be seen in a close to correct proportion.

Shah will also be a Goblin in the film and is just an overall joy to be around and as such he is this column's inaugural featured crew member.

The next report will cover my cameo appearance during a Hobbit market in front of The Green Dragon. There is a particular actor in this scene named Leroy that I'm especially excited to tell you about. He has huge talents and that's even an understatement. I expect that report to land in a few days, but taking my own pictures means a bit of a clearance process.

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More soon! This is going to be a crazy couple of months! Oh, and Happy Birthday to Peter Jackson! Thanks for letting me join the circus for a spell, sir!

-Eric Vespe

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