

On the trail of *The Last Samurai* (I): Taranaki

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Abstract: This research note is Part I of a three-part series documenting fieldwork at sites related to the 2003 film *The Last Samurai*. While *The Last Samurai* has a prominent position in New Zealand's national tourism promotion as an example of film tourism, it has disappeared from local tourism promotion in the region of Taranaki, where the film was shot. On a guided tour of the main locations in August 2017, the reasons for the failure to develop sustainable *Last Samurai* tourism became apparent. A lack of commercial potential stemmed mainly from the relationship of the sites to the contents (Taranaki was a runaway location standing in for Meiji period Japan), rather than from the remoteness or unattractiveness of the sites as a tourism destination. There was a registered increase in tourism relating to the film in 2003, which suggests that the problem rested in over-inflated expectations rather than a failure to seize the opportunity attracting tourism relating to *The Last Samurai*.

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1」である。『ラストサムライ』は、ニュージーランドの国家観光プロモーションにおいて、フィルムツーリズムとして重要な位置を占めている。それにもかかわらず、実際に映画が撮影されたタラナキ地方においては、現在、同作品に関連する観光プロモーションは行われなくなっている。筆者は、『ラストサムライ』ツーリズムが現地で持続的に展開しなかった理由を明らかにするため、2017年8月、カスタマイズ型のガイドツアーに参加する形で、主要なロケ地を巡る現地調査を行った。その結果、『ラストサムライ』ツーリズムが商業的にうまくいかなかったのは、タラナキへの交通アクセスやタラナキの旅行目的地としての魅力に起因するというよりも、むしろ「場所」と「コンテンツ」との関係性が希薄であった(タラナキは、明治時代の日本を撮影するためのランナウェイ・ロケーション＝代理ロケ地)ことに起因することが明らかとなった。また、映画が公開された2003年には、映画に関連した観光事業が大きな盛り上がりを見せている。このことから、『ラストサムライ』ツーリズムが持続的に展開しなかった背景については、地域が『ラストサムライ』関連のツーリズム振興の機会をつかむことに失敗した点より、むしろ当初、地域側が『ラストサムライ』ツーリズムに対し過剰な期待を持ってしまった点に、より大きな問題があったことが示唆された。

Keywords: *The Last Samurai*, New Zealand, film tourism, contents tourism, runaway locations

Introduction

Film-induced tourism has become an important component of tourism strategy and nation branding in New Zealand. In 2019, the national tourism website, newzealand.com, contains the items 'Home of Middle-earth' and 'Film in NZ' within the pop-up menu 'Things to do'. Tourism related to the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies are well known case studies (for example, Beeton 2016, Leotta 2011, Buchmann 2010, Croy 2010), but other films shot in New Zealand include *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Piano*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *King Kong*, *The World's Fastest Indian*, and *The Last Samurai*.

The Last Samurai was largely filmed in Taranaki on the western coast of the North Island in 2002 and 2003, and was shown in cinemas from the end of 2003. It was a big-budget Hollywood production starring Tom Cruise and Watanabe Ken that cost US\$140 million to make and generated worldwide box office revenues of US\$456 (Mendelson 2015). While production of *The Last Samurai* gave Taranaki a strong economic boost, it failed to generate commercially sustainable levels of film tourism. This research note assesses the reasons for that failure based on observations during a customized tour of *Last Samurai* sites on 8 August 2017.

Last Samurai tourism has been examined within a number of frameworks. Sue Beeton mentions *The Last Samurai* as an example of a runaway production, whereby the filming location (New Zealand) stands in for a completely different setting in the story (Meiji era Japan). With runaway productions, the film is less useful in destination branding, but may still induce tourism among those who want 'to see how such deception was achieved' (Beeton 2005, p. 241). Similarly, Alfio Leotta focuses on Mt Taranaki as a substitute for Mt Fuji. However, Leotta notes that the 'emphasis on landscape' is minimal compared to the way the plot revolves around Tom Cruise's character, Algren. As such, the tourism-inducing effects of landscape 'cannot be compared to other tourist-inducing films such as *The Piano* or *LOTR* [*Lord of the Rings*]' (Leotta 2011, p. 153). Anne Buchmann, meanwhile, examines *Last Samurai* tourism within the framework of rural tourism. Citing the remote nature of the Uruti Valley (the main location for the mountain village scenes), she concludes that lower tourist flows in comparison to Hobbiton's position near a main intercity artery help explain why 'an initially quite successful film with carefully planned location management may be unable to establish itself in some rural areas' (Buchmann 2014, p. 366).

While these frameworks are important components of the explanation for why *Last Samurai* tourism foundered in Taranaki, none have factored in the tourism effects in Japan of *The Last Samurai*. Ultimately, this series of three research notes contrasts *Last Samurai* tourism in New Zealand as film (location) tourism with *Last Samurai* tourism as contents tourism in Japan. In particular, *Last Samurai* tourism is viewed as primarily as a case of 'heritage and/or contents tourism' (Seaton *et al.* 2017, p. 10), in which history is considered as 'contents' (narratives, locations, characters, and other creative elements) and a work of popular culture depicting history induces tourism to related heritage sites. Studies that focus on the failure of *Last Samurai* tourism in New Zealand have overlooked the windfall tourism boom in Kagoshima, as discussed in the third research note of this series (Seaton 2019b). Viewing *The Last Samurai* as a period film about nineteenth century Japan (even though it took considerable liberties with the historical and geographical facts) gets us closest to explaining the subsequent tourism levels. The conclusions of this article series, therefore, mirror the findings of Warwick Frost:

Historic films are often shot in locations some distance from where the action was meant to be set: the western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* was filmed in Spain; the Civil War drama *Cold*

Mountain in Romania and for *The Last Samurai*, New Zealand substituted for Japan. However, the destination image created applies to where the film was set, not where it was filmed. Historic films do not create destination images based on the scenery shown on the screen. The attractive image they create is based on history and that can only be experienced by tourists visiting locations actually connected to that history.

(Frost 2006, p. 251)

The *Last Samurai* boom in Taranaki, 2002-2003

Taranaki is on the west coast of the North Island of New Zealand. The capital New Plymouth is fifty minutes by turboprop plane from Auckland, or a five-hour, 360-kilometre drive along often winding roads. In 2002, Taranaki had a population of around 102,000, of whom 48,000 were in New Plymouth. The region had a reputation as a rural backwater, although just before *The Last Samurai* came to Taranaki it was experiencing a minor economic boom. The heart of the local economy revolves around dairy farming and oil and gas extraction. The New Zealand Milk Products factory, the largest in the world, was processing 14 million litres of milk a day in the early 2000s, and Taranaki is the centre of New Zealand's NZ\$1.5 billion hydrocarbons industry (Chamberlain 2002, p. 37, 43).



Figure 1: Map of the Taranaki region (created using Google Maps)

The shooting of *The Last Samurai* was a major economic event. *The Economic Impact Assessment for the Filming of The Last Samurai in Taranaki* concluded that:

the film injected around NZ\$85 million into the national economy, of which around NZ\$50 million was captured by the Taranaki region. [...] Taking the indicative budget expenditure and applying the multiplier analysis gives national gross output of NZ\$196 million, national GDP of NZ\$92 million and 1,403 full time jobs. Out of the total spend Taranaki captured NZ\$69 million of the gross output, NZ\$33 million of the GDP, and 615 jobs.

(Venture Taranaki 2004, p. 52)

A survey of 3,998 local businesses (588 responses, response rate 14.7 per cent) discovered that while many were unaffected by the film (particularly in sectors such as mining, oil and gas, health and education) 66.4 per cent of respondents reported additional income from the film, particularly in service industries, retail and catering (Venture Taranaki 2004, p. 31).

The filming of *The Last Samurai* took place against the backdrop of a broader cultural revitalization project in Taranaki. Taranaki is famous as a surfer's paradise, but overall 'New Plymouth, like most seaside towns, turned its back on the seashore in Victorian times — that was where the railway line, the warehouses, factories (and sometimes the town's sewage) were shoved out of sight' (Chamberlain 2002, p. 39). From 1999, however, construction started on a coastal walkway, which has become a popular attraction for both visitors and locals alike. A 45-metre-high wind wand designed by local artist Len Lye was installed in 2000 as part of the millennial celebrations. Puke Ariki, a facility combining a museum, library and cultural centre, opened in 2003. With the centre and shorefront of New Plymouth transformed, the region gained cultural attractions in the regional capital to complement its natural attractions inland, primarily Mt Taranaki. In May 2003, the local press noted enthusiastically that Taranaki experienced a doubling in overnight stays by international visitors the previous year, even before *The Last Samurai* production crew arrived (Taranaki Daily News 2003c).

It was considered a major coup for Taranaki to attract a big-budget Hollywood production. It might seem strange that New Zealand was chosen to stand in for Meiji era Japan, but the location scout for the film, Charlie Harrington, explained:

The production designer and I studied period Japanese engravings of mountain villages and we consequently discovered the best place to find it was not Japan, but New Zealand. The added attraction was that here you can swing the camera 360 degrees which is really useful when making a movie of this scale.

(Harrington n.d.)

Other reports suggested the filmmakers chose Taranaki as 'a cheaper, English-speaking alternative to Japan' and that '[f]inding "wilderness areas" within 40 minutes' drive of hotel accommodation and city facilities is apparently a Hollywood dream' (Hansen 2003, p. 18-19). Furthermore, in the midst of the *Lord of the Rings* boom, the national government was actively courting major productions and Prime Minister Helen Clark's government launched various schemes to assist commercial filmmakers (Leotta 2011, p. 136-137). At a local level, too, there was enthusiastic support for *The Last Samurai* from Peter Tennent, the mayor of New Plymouth, and the region offered practical support during location hunting.

The production crew arrived in 2002 and started set construction. When the cast arrived in January 2003, the town was abuzz. Star-spotting became 'a regional pastime':

Tom Cruise has bought fish and chips alongside his Oakura neighbours, girlfriend Penelope Cruz has spent her US dollars in Devon St shops, Billy Connolly has been seen in town so much he is practically not noticed any more and, in a surprise visit, Danny De Vito stayed at an inner city hotel, eating in the hotel restaurant with mere mortals. While everyone was dying to get a glimpse of someone famous in January when the Samurai circus hit town, now the big question is: Who hasn't bumped into a movie star?

(Taranaki Daily News 2003a)

The attention caused by the film helped boost tourism to the region, too. Taranaki had an increase in guest nights of 26 per cent in March and 30 per cent in May 2003 compared to March and May of the previous year. Destination Taranaki estimated the additional tourism was worth NZ\$6.2 million from January to May 2003, the period of filming (Taranaki Daily News 2003b; 2003d). Much interest was generated by the filming process, and many family and friends of the cast, crew and extras also visited Taranaki during production (Rhodes 2017).

There were high hopes, too, for a tourism boom after the film's release. In May 2003, still over half a year before the film's release but in the midst of the 'Hollywood high' during production, the *Taranaki Daily News* (2003a) reported: 'Tourist numbers are also expected to dramatically increase with the release of the movie'. A few months later, another article said, 'The Last Samurai film sites in Taranaki are to be re-created for hordes of Japanese tourists expected to pour into the region' (Taranaki Daily News 2003e). Early in 2004, as the film went on general release in New Zealand, a full-page special article (Taranaki Daily News 2004) showed readers the main filming locations: Pukekura Park (army training ground scenes), Port Taranaki (set recreating Meiji period Yokohama), the Barrett Street set in the old Barrett Street hospital (indoor scenes), a farm on Upper Pitone Road off Highway 45 (the final battle scenes), Uruti Valley (the mountain village scenes), Lake Mangamahoe (the woods where Algren is captured by Katsumoto), and Inglewood Studio (indoor scenes).

Later in 2004 as the media hype wore off, there was a change in tone regarding the tourism potential of *The Last Samurai*. The film enjoyed an unusually long run at local cinemas, but Venture Taranaki economic development director Anne Probert was quoted as saying the film was 'great for tourism', but no further details were given. Venture Taranaki's economic impact assessment, meanwhile, noted that during production 'the film provided a buzz throughout the region. Optimism was boosted.' (Venture Taranaki 2004, p. 5), but it was circumspect about the tourism potential:

Several national and international publications (including some travel magazines) wrote articles on Taranaki in relation to TLS being filmed there. This has created exposure and raised the profile of the region as a tourist destination both internationally and nationally. [...] There is a possibility that the film itself may generate interest in terms of finding out more and actually visiting where it was filmed, particularly in regard to Japanese audiences. However, it is difficult to estimate the magnitude of a film on flows of people.

(Venture Taranaki 2004, p. 35)

In reality, by this time the limited nature of the *Last Samurai* tourism boom was already apparent, and by 2006 local tourist authorities accepted that the economic impacts of tourism 'had in fact been minimal' (Leotta 2011, p. 138).

Visiting the *Last Samurai* sites in Taranaki: 8 August 2017

The aim of my fieldwork was to visit the major sites relating to *The Last Samurai* as depicted on the national tourism promotion website: <https://www.newzealand.com/us/feature/the-last-samurai-filming-locations/> [Accessed 1 November 2017]. Most sites were difficult to access on public transport, and the mountain village and battlefield sites were on private property. So, I arranged a customized tour of the main shooting locations for *The Last Samurai* through Taranaki Tours. My guide, Tom Parsons, offered a Samurai Village Tour to the Uruti site through until 2008. I was the first person in a long time to request a *Last Samurai* tour. Even at the peak of interest, the owners of the land were limiting the number of visitors to twenty or thirty per week (Leotta 2011, p. 158). Tom had taken perhaps a few hundred visitors (including many Japanese and Koreans) on tours before demand fizzled out and his tours were discontinued.

There had been little attempt as a region to turn the *Last Samurai* locations into tourism assets (Rhodes 2017). As noted above, there was a plan to recreate some sites to attract Japanese tourists. However, local authorities had not negotiated rights in advance of the filming, and Warner Brothers did not want to be involved in the tourism ventures that were being proposed locally. The production company dismantled the sets after filming. On the site of the mountain village set, the Radcliffe family (who owned the farm) reconstructed one of the huts using the original set plans and ran tours, although they were not allowed to use the name 'The Last Samurai' for marketing purposes (Leotta 2011, p. 153). In September 2003 it was reported that a company called Maori Journeys Ltd was planning to run bus tours in the anticipation that 'thousands of Japanese' would come to New Zealand (Taranaki Daily News 2003e). But, none of these ventures lasted and organized tours of the samurai village had shut down by 2008 (Buchmann 2014, p. 366).¹

In retrospect (and hindsight is always clearer than foresight), even if Taranaki had done more to exploit *The Last Samurai* as a tourism resource, the potential for long-term tourism was never really there. The media and academic literature regularly focus on success stories in film tourism, but failures are often more revealing. In Japan, for example, there have been so many failed attempts to convert period drama sets into permanent tourist sites that local authorities these days know not even to try (Seaton *et al.* 2017, pp. 153-159). The tourism flows typically go to related heritage sites, not filming locations, in the wake of popular culture representations of history. By the time of my visit to Taranaki in August 2017, *The Last Samurai* was conspicuous by its absence from all local tourism publicity materials, despite its prominent position in the national tourism promotion website. Nor were there any signs, plaques or information boards describing the connection to *The Last Samurai* at any of the sites I visited. In short, *The Last Samurai* no longer exists on the local Taranaki tourism map.

The experience of visiting *Last Samurai* sites confirmed in my mind the conclusions of Leotta (2011) and Pratt (2007) that there was never much commercial tourism potential. The filming locations divided into three types: first, locations on land open to the public for free; second, locations inaccessible without the permission of private landowners; and third, locations that had lost all visible connection to *The Last Samurai*. Sites in this third category included the old Barrett Street Hospital (demolished in 2016), and Inglewood Studio (a former dairy factory, now converted for commercial use). The other locations could be visited and my impressions of their commercial potential are as follows.

Pukekura Park

The picturesque cricket pitch in Pukekura Park, New Plymouth, was where the parade ground scenes were filmed. Figure 2 is taken from almost exactly the same spot as a scene in the film. The characteristic bleachers on each side of the ground are visible in the film, although the townscape in the background was digitally converted into nineteenth century Japan. This site is within a public park and has no commercial potential.



Figure 2: Pukekura Park

Port Taranaki

At the waterfront, a large set was built where the scenes set in Yokohama were shot. There are no remnants of the set today and the land is used by local businesses. Again, there is no commercial potential.



Figure 3: Port Taranaki

Battlefield Sites

The scenes for the climactic battle were filmed on private farmland south of New Plymouth, which was returned to its former use after filming. As we drove around the farm, the farmer joked how he would like to be able to charge NZ\$80 for entry to his farm as happens now at the Hobbiton set in Matamata (Seaton 2019a). But this farm on Upper Pitone Road was hardly suitable as a tourist site. It was hard to see what was filmed where. Even the farmer (who purchased the land after the filming was over) admitted that he was unable to work out where some parts were filmed. Some places were obvious — such as a distinctive bend in the track around which soldiers run and ride (Figure 4), and the elevated command positions of the Meiji government army (Figure 5) — but most places were unrecognizable. It is possible that some areas were altered for the filming and then returned to their original state (the terrain across which Katsumoto’s forces made their final charge seem very flat compared to any of the terrain I saw in the farm). In any case, for dairy farmland to be converted into a film tourism attraction, it would have to have promised film tourism revenues exceeding the value of using the land for farming. There is little evidence of this being the case.



Figure 4: A distinctive bend in the road used during battle scenes.



Figure 5: Meiji army command hillocks

Uruti Valley

The Uruti Valley site, where the samurai village scenes were filmed, probably had the greatest touristification potential. The samurai village scenes are when Algren undergoes his personal transformation, and it is one of the most memorable locations in the film. The reconstructed set is still visible from the public road above the farm, but it is now in a state of disrepair. We sought permission to enter the farm as part of my customized tour, but on the day of my visit it was not convenient for the owners and we had to make do with the view from the road.

After filming, the sets were dismantled. The Radcliffe family, who own the farm, built a replica of one of the buildings and ran tours to the village site. These tours had the interest not only of a tractor ride into picturesque scenery, but also afforded insights into the film production process. Historical dramas require sites that not only have no visible signs of modernity (access roads, electricity cables, and so on), but are also close enough to the cast and staff's accommodation and a large space for actors' trailers, equipment and catering trucks. The farm fitted these conditions perfectly. There was an approach road and space for trucks in the valley floor, but it was invisible from the top of the hill where the village set stood (Figures 6 and 7).² As tourists were conveyed up this road by tractor, they heard narrations about the filmmaking process. Once at the filming locations, there was a replica hut familiar to those who had seen the film.



Figure 6: Samurai village approach road



Figure 7: Samurai village location

Lake Mangamahoe

The scene where Algren is captured by Katsumoto's warriors was filmed in woodland by Lake Mangamahoe. This site was touted as having tourism potential in 2003. *The Daily News* reported that 'The highlight of the Mountain Like Fuji tour will be a realistic battle scene re-enacted in a forest at Lake Mangamahoe' with riders in samurai armour ambushing tourists' (Taranaki Daily News 2003e). But, while the access road created for filming was still there, the trees on the spot where filming took place had been cut down. It was merely a graveled road with saplings growing in preparation for future felling. The atmosphere of the forest as seen in the film was evident in other parts of the forest, but the place where Algren's capture was filmed was unrecognizable.



Figure 8: The remnants of the forest location, Lake Mangamahoe park.

Mount Taranaki as Mount Fuji

Mt Taranaki stood in for Mt Fuji in *The Last Samurai*. Mt Fuji is one of the most iconic images of Japan, and it (more precisely, something reminiscent of it) appears twice in the film: once when Algren sees Japan for the first time from the deck of the steamship taking him to Yokohama in 1876, and once as he is taken to the mountain village after his capture in the forest battle. However, even assuming that people would be encouraged to visit Taranaki because the mountain resembled Mt Fuji, the places from which that view could be gained were public highways. There was no commercial potential beyond the ability of associations with Mt Fuji to attract more visitors to the region of Taranaki. Conversely, there is a considerable downside to over-promoting the comparison, namely the possibility of converting Mt Taranaki into a substitute (read 'second rate') version of 'the real attraction' in far off Japan, and thereby degrading its value as a beautiful mountain in its own right that has an important position in local Maori culture.

The collective potential of the sites

The discussion has revealed that none of the *Last Samurai* locations in themselves had obvious commercial potential. It is conceivable that as a collection of sites they could have been enough of a draw to make touristification profitable for Taranaki as a destination. In other words, the tourism benefits to Taranaki are not from entry fees but from overnight stays and guided tours. However, the distance between the various sites is considerable. Even assuming sufficient demand, access by coach (the size of vehicle required to make tours affordable to a mass market and commercially viable for tour operators) would have been difficult without considerable investment in road widening and parking areas. The sites seemed more appropriate for visitation by small numbers of

visitors traveling by private vehicle. Ultimately the key issue hindering *Last Samurai* tourism was not the quality, scale, accessibility or development of the physical sites themselves, but rather their relationship to the contents, a point which I explore in the third research note in this series (Seaton 2019b).

Conclusions: Commercial failure, experiential success

In a commercial sense, *Last Samurai* tourism in Taranaki failed. More realistically, the extent of *Last Samurai* tourism was probably ‘par for the course’ for a runaway location. The archetypal pattern of contents tourism is ‘boom and bust’ (Seaton *et al.* 2017, pp. 33-34). A work of popular culture triggers temporary interest in a destination before other works shift the attention of the traveling public elsewhere. Taranaki did see a temporary boost in visitors taking *Last Samurai* tours, but a year or two is typically the duration of such booms. The stand-alone film that generates tourism long after its release date is a rarity (the *Sound of Music* tours in Salzburg are a notable case). But, *The Last Samurai* did improve name recognition for Taranaki as a tourist destination and coincided with a broader process of opening up the region to tourism, such as the construction of the coastal walkway. In 2016, the Lonely Planet guides named Taranaki as the second best region in the world to visit in 2017. It is conceivable that the attention generated by *The Last Samurai* was a factor that helped Taranaki achieve this accolade.

Furthermore, it might be argued that despite commercial failure, *Last Samurai* tourism remains an experiential success, in other words an enjoyable destination for film fans precisely because commercialization did not succeed. Location hunters, who enjoy the adventure of seeking out places of importance to them as fans, may enjoy a day traveling around unmarked sites far more than the experience of following a well-worn trail created by the masses. Indeed, as both a tourist and a researcher, I enjoyed my day in Taranaki far more than I did my day in Hobbiton two days later, which is the subject of the second research note in this three-part series.

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Notes

¹ Internet searches for evidence of these tours provides virtually no material. The tour operator sites no longer advertise *Last Samurai* tours, sites have shut down, and because the tours were just before the advent of social media there are few voices of travelers. Searches on TripAdvisor bring up locations in Japan, primarily Mt Shōsha, but not Taranaki.

² For photographs during shooting, see Harrington (n.d.).

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