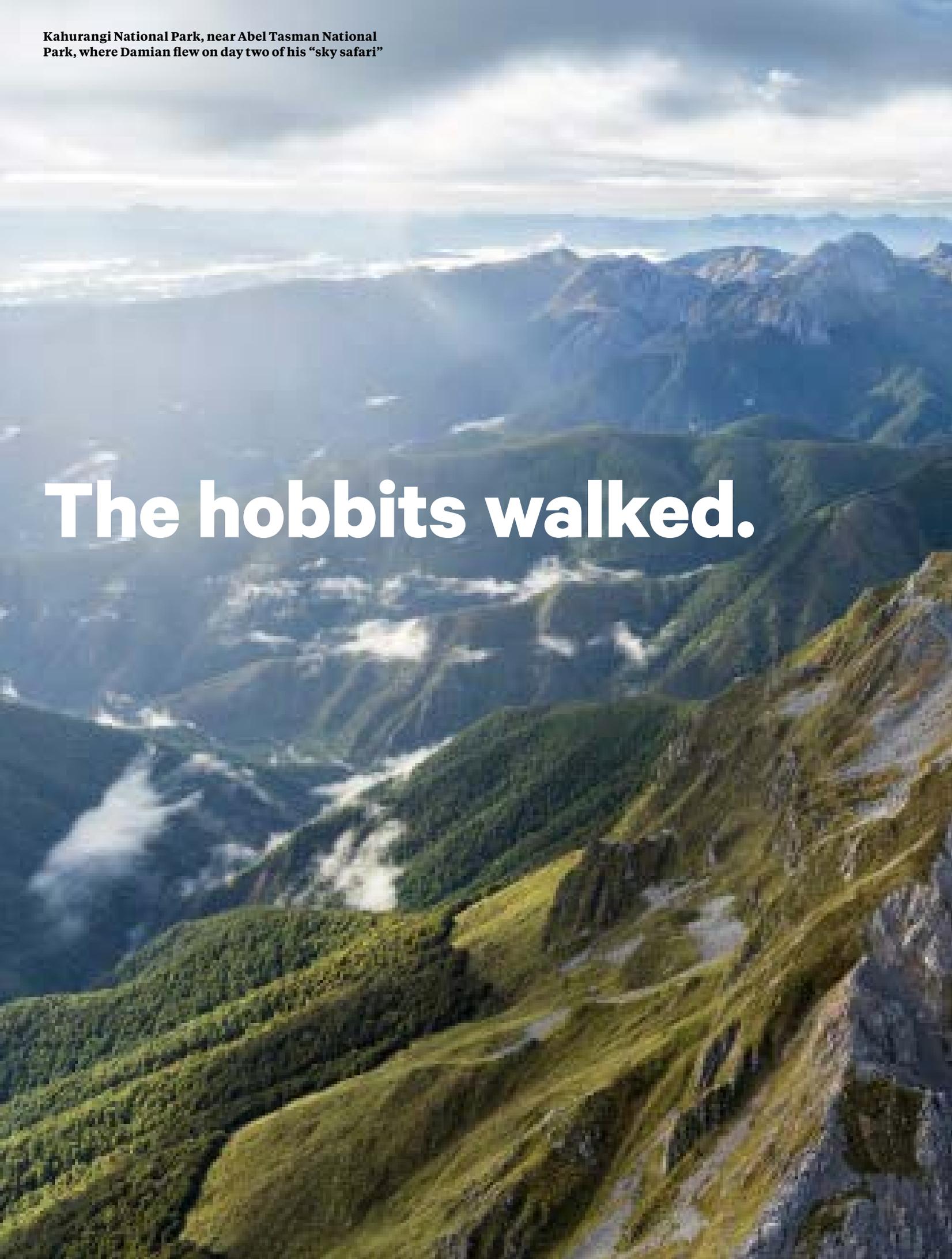
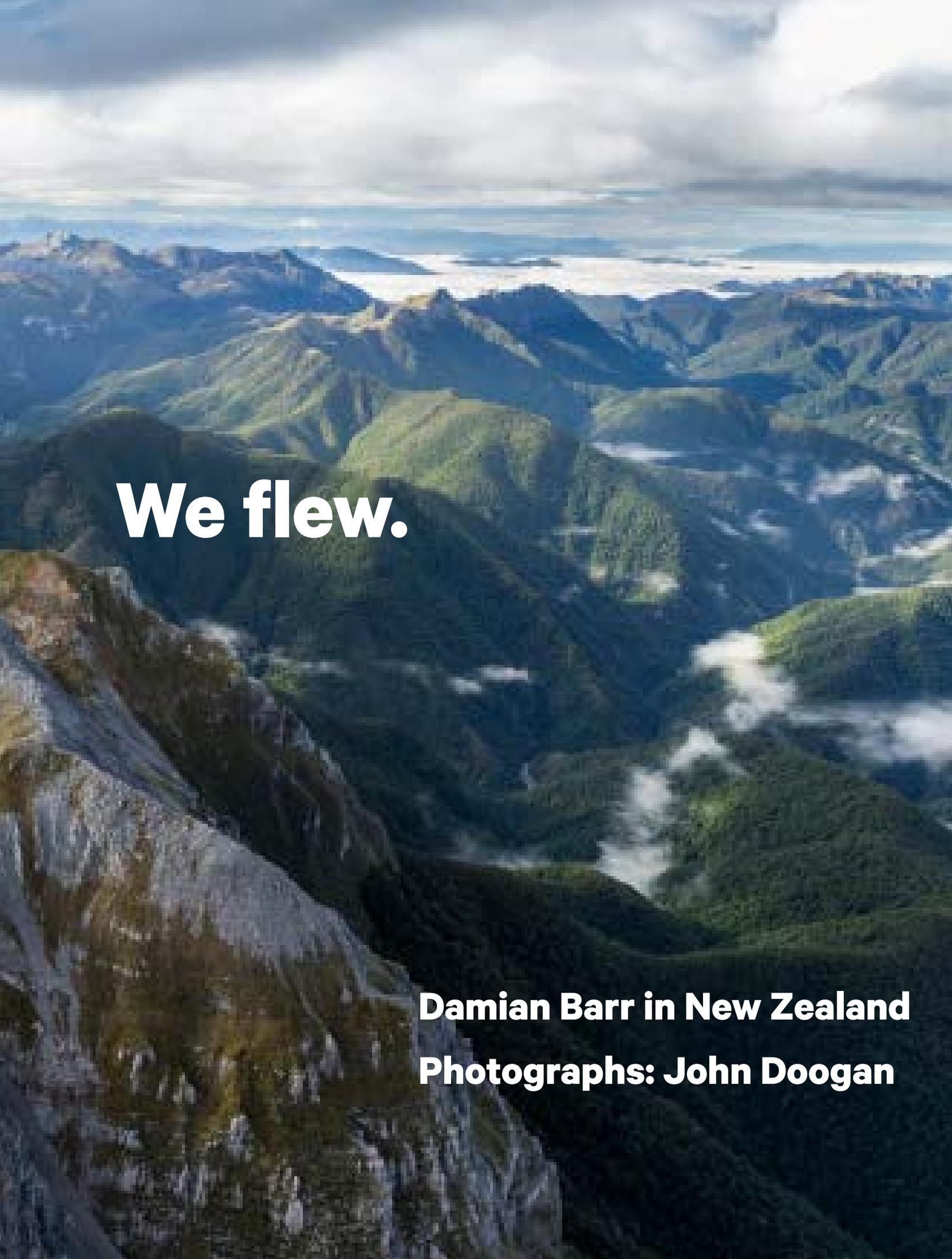


Kahurangi National Park, near Abel Tasman National Park, where Damian flew on day two of his “sky safari”

The hobbits walked.



An aerial photograph of a vast mountain range in New Zealand. The foreground shows a rocky, sparsely vegetated slope. The middle ground is filled with rolling green hills and valleys, some with patches of snow or light-colored rock. In the far distance, a city is visible, surrounded by a layer of low-lying clouds or haze. The sky is filled with dramatic, grey clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon.

We flew.

**Damian Barr in New Zealand
Photographs: John Doogan**





Almost instantly I spot a glacier. It doesn't glitter like a Fox's mint, but it is vast. It trickles into Lake Tekapo — so blue it looks fake. "Yeah, we put Toilet Duck in it every night," laughs Richard, the pilot

He's got his own plane. His own pilot. And a chance to be in the driving seat. During a four-day "sky safari" over South Island, *Damian Barr* sees the eighth wonder of the world and flies through a rainbow

"Have we got parachutes?" I ask the pilot — my pilot — as I fiddle with my seat belt in the pre-dawn gloaming. It's January, so it's summer on New Zealand's South Island. The sun can't wait to get up and about. The sky above Christchurch airport is blushing. So am I.

Richard's eyebrows pop up behind his aviators, and I realise that asking a pilot about parachutes is like asking a hairdresser about wigs. "Don't worry, we won't need them," he smiles, his teeth reassuringly even and white. If he takes good care of them, his engines must be sparkling. I glance at his shoes, comfortingly shiny. Then I notice how fresh his face is, how very twentysomething fresh, and I remind myself that age and experience are not the same. Richard Kennard isn't just a fully qualified pilot with thousands of hours behind and below him; he's also a flight instructor. I'm in safe hands.

I'm in safe hands. For the next four days we'll be tinned together, flying wherever I fancy — weather willing. A Sky Safari is more like a road trip, only there's no car, no roads, very little traffic, no discernible speed limit. You go where you want, see what you've dreamt of. You can self-fly, and most people do, but I can barely drive a car. The plane is a white Partenavia P68. Most planes are white, but I memorise the colour in case I have to find it in the aeronautical equivalent of a car park. It has two — count them, two — engines, and six beige leather seats. It's a little plane, not a private jet — we must clamber in and out the hatch at the side. There is no toilet, no galley, no emergency exit. No entertainment system. No lights will come on in an emergency. No slide will inflate. "See the axe on the floor," says Richard. "That's how we get out."

When he says axe, it sounds like ex. Yesterday, Richard was taking crates of rare-breed chickens way down south. For the next four days, he's got me.

Each Sky Safari is bespoke, and although the plane is not luxurious, it's still a privilege. Richard and I agree my itinerary in advance — just enough Middle Earth to satisfy my inner geek, a glacier or two and a pilgrimage to the Marlborough Sounds, where water is turned to sauvignon blanc. And at some point I might want to take the controls. Somehow I



Going up in the world: Damian Barr (right) gets briefed before a flying lesson with his pilot/instructor Richard Kennard

feel flying — with its relative lack of obstacles — might be easier than driving. Our flight plan is set.

On day one Richard meets me at Canterbury Aero Club on the outskirts of Christchurch, the earthquake-slammed capital of the South Island. He's wearing a school-white, short-sleeved shirt with black-and-gold CAC epaulettes. I note, with relief, that he smells soapy and isn't chewing gum. There's no special terminal, just a door

out to the runway, where our plane awaits.

I pop in earplugs and don my headphones as both engines whirr into life. Slowly, we taxi to the runway. Right in front of us, a huge Air New Zealand jet lumbers off. I feel like a wren faced with an eagle. "Mike Indio Romeo," says Richard to air-traffic control in noticeably smooth tones. "That's my radio voice," he says. "You gotta have one, you can't just speak." After some chatter, Mike Indio Romeo — that's us — is cleared. We're hurtling

Day 1: Christchurch > D'Urville Island > Blenheim

Flying time: 4 hrs (250 nautical miles)
Driving time: 9 hrs
Hobbit time*: 5 weeks, 1 day

Day 2: Blenheim > Golden Bay > Abel Tasman > Southern Lakes > Queenstown

Flying time: 4 hrs (375 nautical miles)
Driving time: 14 hrs
Hobbit time: 9 weeks, 4 days

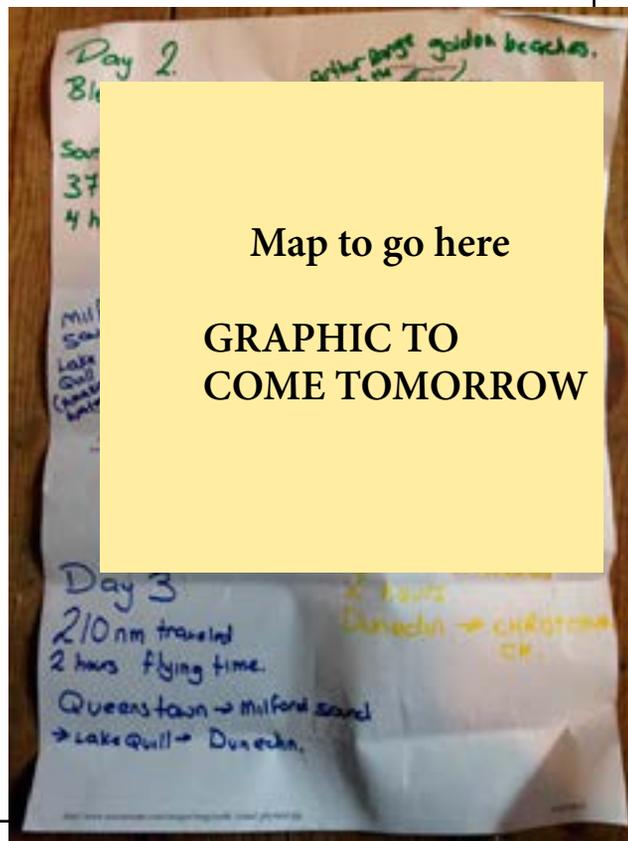
Day 3: Queenstown > Milford Sound > Lake Quill > Dunedin

Flying time: 2hrs (210 nautical miles)
Driving time: 9hrs
Hobbit time: 4 weeks, 6 days

Day 4: Dunedin > Christchurch

Flying time: 2hrs (210 nautical miles)
Driving time: 5hrs
Hobbit time: 3 weeks, 2 days

*Hobbit time calculated on Hobbit walking 10 miles per day



furiously along the runway, but as soon as our wheels leave the ground everything feels slower, smoother, quieter.

Below us, Christchurch looks like a war zone. Four years after the earthquake that killed 185 people, most of the centre remains levelled. They lost more than 1,500 buildings. From above it's like a chessboard at the end of the game. Only nobody won here. The cathedral is still standing, but only just. It's hard to believe this is New Zealand, not some country we comfort ourselves by calling "Third World". It feels a bit like Berlin after the wall, with grief and opportunity palpable.

We're at 2,000ft already, and still climbing. As we clear the city, patchwork fields unfurl across gentle hills. Richard hands me a map I unfold, filling our cabin and blocking his view. If this was a car, we'd have crashed, but in a plane there's nothing to hit. Mountains and other obstacles are fairly easily avoidable. You can see a long, long way. We've got GPS, but the map is more fun. I visualise our progress as the moving dotted line in the Indiana Jones films. Below stretch the Canterbury Plains. It looks like Kent, only it's parched brown by the long, hot summer. Our compass says we're heading north. We plan to fly anticlockwise around the entire South Island — which is a bit bigger than England — in just four days. It would be impossible by car, as there simply are no roads where we're going. Even if there were, it would take weeks and weeks. As for walking, ask Bilbo Baggins.

Distance is different up here. Even though we're in the air, distance is measured in

“I feel like a coin being shaken out of a piggy bank by a child, but I don't care. I must see the dolphins again. I wish I had fish to throw them”

nautical miles: 1 NM is 1,852 metres. A mile on the ground is 1,609 metres. Our speed is in knots — 1 knot is 1.15 miles per hour. Richard explains this to me and I nod. It's more about the journey than the destination, I get that.

Soon we've left the shire, and hills grow into mountains, the Inner and Seaward Kaikōura ranges are a safe distance to our left. At 5,000ft I catch sight of our shadow chasing us way down below. Kaikōura Bay, famous for its dolphins, shimmers ahead. Cloud is gathering, so we dip for a look but not too low enough for our engines to disturb wildlife.

The bay looks frothy, and as I start to think “storm”, we get close enough for me to see the waves are actually hundreds of dark-grey dolphins leaping almost as one. I press my face against the window, forgetting its only flimsy Perspex. Richard banks the plane steeply for a closer look and I feel like a coin

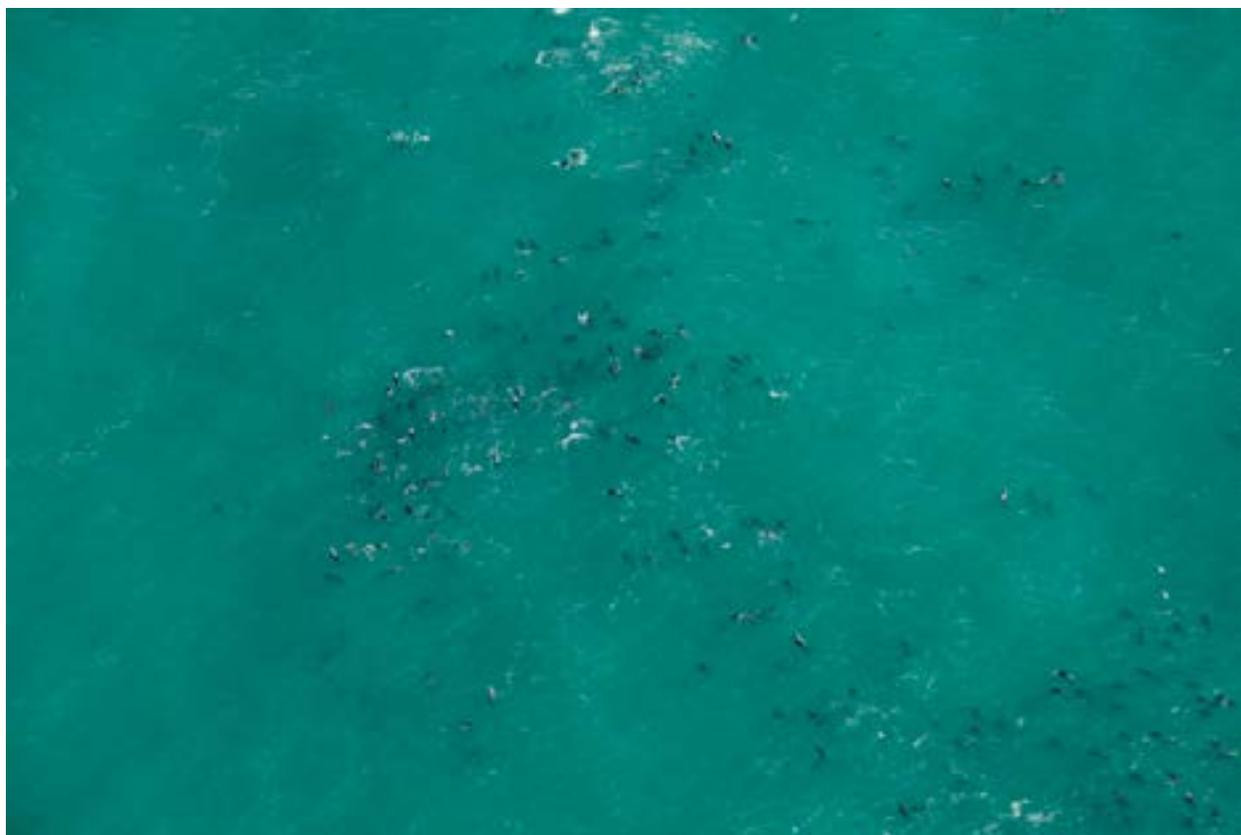
being shaken out of a piggy bank by a child but I don't care. I have to see the dolphins again. They actually seem pleased to see us; I wish I'd brought some fish to throw for them.

I'm still swooning from the dolphin display when we turn towards the mountains. Between the Kaikōura ranges is an impossible pass. It looks like a dare. The closer we get, the higher we climb, and as we zip through, the ridge lurches away, rollercoaster style. Soon the mountains are treeless tundra-topped, bald as monks. Up ahead soars our first big peak: Mount Tapuae-o-Uenuku. It is 9,465ft and has white beauty patches of snow. We go round and round the mountain, just because we can, and I start enjoying the tight turns.

Far below the silver ribbon of the Awatere river guides us out to the Marlborough Sounds — hundreds of spectacular drowned valleys which out-fjord Norway. We're almost there when it becomes difficult to spot the river for cloud. Richard goes lower. Rain streaks our screen, and we've no wipers. Only it's not rain, it's something called virga, which is water that never makes it to the ground. Our blue skies have gone. It's cloudier than a 1980s pop video. “I'm not comfortable with those,” says Richard, pointing at some big ones. “They're towering nimbus, they can take us up or down thousands of feet. They're just not safe.” Using his radio voice, he establishes contact with Woodbourne Air Field, and turns us round. It's frustrating, but he's right.

We land, smoothly, and we hire a car and drive to Nelson. We stop off at the Brancott Estate Winery, and I sample while Richard

Kalkoura Bay, where, from above, Barr sees “hundreds of dolphins leaping out as one”





The outlet of the Godley River - HAVE BEEN TOLD THIS PIC MIGHT CHANGE

abstains. A few miles along the road is the Pelorus River, down which the dwarves, fleeing the forces of Mordor, floated in barrels. It is so still and clear, it looks like there is no water at all. It's dark when we arrive in Nelson, and still dark when we leave because who doesn't want to see dawn from the sky.

"Sorry about all this cloud," says Richard, as we take off into day two. He takes weather personally. "It's still too bad for Marlborough Sound." We tweak our route and head over Abel Tasman National Park (one of 10 on the South Island). Golden Bay is as described — bracelets of 24-carat sand sandwiched between chartreuse fern-tree forests and cerulean seas. It's high-definition landscape. Heading inland we swoop over the Arthur Range, scene of the endless trampings in Lord of the Rings. The actors had to be helicoptered in and there are no Hollywood luxuries. .

The Arthurs give way to the Southern Alps — this epic range forms the spine of the South Island. Beneath it, tectonic plates shift with alarming frequency. Or perhaps here be dragons.

Peaks higher than any I've imagined poke up through clouds like knees in a bubble bath. The star of today will be Mount Cook, Aoraki, "the cloud piercer" in Maori. But as we get closer, another front rolls in. The mountain is shy, shrouded in cloud. She doesn't want to be seen. Ditto the Franz Josef glacier. "Sorry," says Richard. Nature doesn't do itineraries.

“There’s no weather to worry about, no scenery to wonder over, so I take the controls. I feel the plane as a living thing. For a second, I’m flying”

Queenstown is today's destination — the extreme-sports capital. We fly low over the famous bungee bridge, which is as close as I want to get. I count five private jets as we land. There is a Louis Vuitton on the high street. The town is sandwiched between the Remarkables and Lake Wakatipu. If it wasn't for all the adventure, it would be serene. My balcony at the Saint Moritz Hotel allows me to watch other people water-ski. Very relaxing. After all the flying I fancy a walk, so put on my hiking boots and tackle the hill behind the hotel. The Tiki Trail is surprisingly steep but within minutes all the views are mine. I sleep for 14 hours that night.

On day three Richard hands me my own aviators. "You'll need them." Today is Milford Sound — Rudyard Kipling called it the eighth wonder of the world. Somehow nearby Doubtful Sound sounds more exciting. Up we go again. Almost instantly I spot a glacier. It doesn't glitter like a Fox's Mint, but it is vast. It trickles into a lake so blue it looks fake. "Yeah, we put Toilet Duck in it every night," laughs Richard. This blueness subsides into a waterfall that cascades down into a mist of its own making. Then Milford Sound. Without cloud. The first iconic landmark we can actually see. We go lower and the Jurassic Park theme music plays in my head. Waterfalls spill profligately down the green sides of the mountainous valley. It's almost too much, but Richard takes me round again. Soon, too soon, we're back out over a low flat valley en route to Dunedin. There's no weather to worry about, no scenery to wonder over, so Richard lets me take the controls. Well, it has two sets. So I copy his movements and feel the plane almost as a living thing and, for a second, I'm flying.

Dunedin is Gaelic for Edinburgh, and it's a very small version of Auld Reekie. It even has a castle — New Zealand's only one. Burns casts a chancer's eye from his plinth in the Octagon, the town centre, and bagpipes can be heard. When locals hear my accent they

become even friendlier (if that were possible). This is no tourist act — they love Scotland as much as they stories. The Dunedin Writers and Readers Festival (aka DWRF — it gets the Tolkien crowd in) is hugely popular and the place is being honoured as a Unesco City of Literature (just like Edinburgh). I stay over in the Camp Estate at Larnach Castle, which commands the Otago Bay.

Next morning is our final flight. "I feel a bit sad," says Richard. I do too. We avoid the low-flying albatrosses outside Dunedin and head north towards Christchurch to complete our loop. He talks to me of nautical miles and knots, and I understand. An hour in and my headphones crackle alarmingly. Richard's lips are moving, but I can't hear him. He points inland at gathering darkness. Thunder. We nip out to sea and soon I can hear again. The clouds continue talking to one another. Sometimes they shout.

Ahead, the gentle green contours of the Canterbury Plains stretch softly, a tablecloth that's been spread over the tea things. Soon we'll be landing. But not just yet ■ *Damian Barr travelled as a guest of Discover the World (01737 214 291; discover-the-world.co.uk), which has a six-night privately guided aerial tour of New Zealand starting from £5,341pp (based on two sharing), inc. aircraft with instructor, 15 flying hours, accommodation, activities and some meals.*

New Zealand

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