

What's the Appeal of Visiting Volcanoes?

Our planet is shaped by giant geological forces, but most processes take thousands and millions of years to occur and are too slow to be visible. On an active volcano, things change every day, and sometimes such changes are dramatic: new mountains are built up within a few days, new craters collapse, sometimes entire mountains disappear, lava flows turn forest or villages into barren deserts. But despite the sometimes huge destruction in major eruptions, life continues on volcanoes all the time and always wins back its territory in time-scales that can be understood and seen. Only a few years after lava destroys land, new plants start to grow and sometimes, within a decade or so, new rainforest can appear on the young flows. Volcanoes let islands be born and change coastlines. Topographic maps need to be redrawn every year.



Destruction and birth go hand in hand at volcanoes. Volcanic soil is particularly fertile, elevated areas often enjoy better climate. It is no coincidence that despite the potential of destruction, volcanoes are some of the most densely populated areas on the planet.

It is no wonder that volcanoes have always been feared and honored by the people living around them. In ancient times, volcanoes were connected with gods and spirits. Eruptions of volcanoes were acts of gods, sometimes gifts to humans, at other times warnings to them or punishments. When the Santorini volcano exploded in around 1613 BC, a large part of the island, at that time hosting a highly developed and flourishing rich trading nation, disappeared in a single day giving rise to the myth of Lost Atlantis.



The interaction between mankind and volcanoes has not only created legends, it strongly shapes local culture. Think of Santorini's famous pumice-caves at the base of its particular architecture, the tradition of excellent wines growing on volcanic pumice, and much more. Volcanoes also are subject and contributors to many disciplines of science as well. This is often at a level of comprehension that does not require scientific training, and thus, is particularly interesting to travelers. Thanks to Vesuvius' large eruption in 79 A.D., Pompeii is now an invaluable open-air museum of what Roman life looked like 2000 years ago.

The founder of VolcanoDiscovery, a tour company specialized in offering travel to volcanoes and volcanic areas, volcanologist Dr. Tom Pfeiffer, thinks that another particularly appealing aspect of volcanoes is their esthetic appeal. Most eruptions are not killers and provide fascinating sights and sounds. What about the natural fireworks from volcanoes like Stromboli when jets of glowing yellow and orange lava pieces shoot through the air to draw majestic and geometrically perfect parabola? The majesty of a 1000 foot lava fountain standing up like a giant torch to reach the sky? The crackling sounds of an active lava flow creeping over older ones, providing a soft warm light and drawing red moving lines into the landscape? Whatever phenomenon an active volcano shows, it makes man feel little and fills the mind and soul with awe. Something we rarely find in our technical day-by-day life, far from nature.



So, who comes on volcano tours? According to Pfeiffer, clients range from experience-hungry wealthy travelers who suddenly want something different than another five-star resort to couples whose kids have grown up and who seek a different holiday and experience something more interesting than just lying on the beach. For many, it is the mixture of being active, some adventure and meeting other people from different backgrounds play an important rule. In fact, volcanoes are international and global in the best of meanings.

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