

In the Presence of a Fire God

The glow of the lava was even more awesome in the fading light of sunset. We stood there tentatively, Kathi, Anna and I, with about a dozen other people, a few hundred yards from the edge of the molten lava crater on the edge of an active volcano, torn by the desire of wanting to run in fear for our lives, but at the same time unable to - paralyzed in awe and wanting to witness such a spectacular site. We were frozen in anticipation, excitement, exhilaration and wonder, conflicted with a dread and terror, waiting for the Fire God to speak and at the same time fearing that he would!

A deep rumbling vibration, more felt than heard, originated somewhere deep within the bowels of the earth. Then an even more implausible force shook violently, deep within the ground and hurtled toward the surface, challenging the very confines of the mountain itself. It was as if some immensely huge and powerful entity deep within the core of the earth had been wronged and was bellowing out in indignation and defiance, racing toward the surface to release its vengeance. The immensity and power of this force under our feet rendered us humans small, insignificant and unimportant. With an explosion of smoke ash and thunder, the Fire God roared in an undeniable voice, spewing red hot rocks, lava, smoke and thunder high into the air! The strong wind at our back and the shape of the lava tube forced the flaming debris to the far side of the volcano slope. Red hot rocks soared high into the air in a smoking and burning arc, falling to the ground and smoldering in a dull red glow on the far shoulder of the volcano. Finer ash and smoke soared thousands of feet into the air. All of this just a few hundred feet from us! This was certainly a calculated vantage point, and we were grateful for it, but also mindful of the whims of nature and of fire gods.

We were on the island of Tanna in the Vanuatu Island chain, on the edge of the active volcanic crater of Mt. Yasur. Were we safe? I suppose that is a relative matter. The government of Vanuatu monitors and controls access to the site, periodically closing it when the volcano becomes 'too active'. None the less, we and the other tourists periodically turned to each other with a combination of looks that said, "Should we really be here?" and, at the same time, "I wouldn't miss this opportunity for anything!" The three of us had a local guide, Stanley, who lives in the village below. He has lived here in the volcano's shadow all his life and had a very healthy knowledge of and respect for the volcano. Stanley assures us that they very rarely lose a tourist, and then only because the tourists did not have a guide and venture in the wrong places at the wrong time. I suppose this made me feel somewhat better about the nominal fee paid for his service. But his presence and familiarity with the volcano at this moment seemed like transient assurance. As the volcano rumbled and spewed, the look on Stanley's face was impassive and unreadable. He and his people believed that the volcano is the God Yasur, and that Yasur punished you when you were bad. The locals still approach the volcano with a religious respect and devotion. We were hoping that Stanley had been good since his last trip up here, perhaps reluctant to consider whether this tenet of punishment also applied to foreigners who unwittingly trespass on sacred ground.

The volcano roared to life again with a thundering rumble that shook the earth with unmistakable and un-deniable command, a vibration and power that left me once more startled, even terrified, and yet struck some inner resonance deep within me. More red hot rocks, smoke and ash spewed out into the night sky. Stanley remained impassive, but now with a 'keep the tourists comfortable smile' pasted on his face. We continue to take photos and videos when we can remember to close our mouths and point and shoot.

Since the beginning of the human race, our ancestors have considered volcanoes sacred, as transcendent and mystical, as living entities, seeking to please and appease them. They offered them sacrifices and prayed to them, treating them with religious devotion, respect and loyalty, raising them to the status of Gods. With the lack of understanding of the forces of nature, it is easy to appreciate why our ancestors gave volcanoes this god like status. The whimsical occurrence of eruptions, seemingly coinciding with human transgressions, the sulfur smoke, the hot lava, the flaming rocks spewing and arcing high into the air, and especially the immense power of the deep rumbling might easily convince one. These implausible forces certainly put me in sympathy with those ancient feelings and emotions. Another more powerful rumble seems to be the fire god's response to any doubts I might have of its eminence, leaving me for a brief moment, in empathy with our remotest ancestors. These same feeling were undoubtedly experienced by the earliest of human beings as they dared to stand on the edge and look their fire god in the eye. Standing so close to the edge, and staring over the very brink and being at the mercy of the Fire God, it seems a deep primal emotion is awakened, its roots undoubtedly sown in eons of ancestral memory and heritage that were at one time an essential part of our existence and an undeniable part of our ancient past stored somewhere deep within our ancient bloodline.

As the fading light of dusk surrenders to darkness, the red glow of the volcano becomes even more majestic. We could watch for hours more. However, with photos and videos in hand and unexpected feelings and emotions imprinted within us, we reluctantly decide not to press our fortune or risk that Yasur might grow weary of our presence. We head back down the slope to the parking area and the vehicles. It was dark as our truck rattled and bounced down the dirt road, the head lights piercing the foreboding darkness of a tropical jungle which flanked Yasur's slopes- a tropical jungle teeming with life – back toward our boat and the perceived safety of the ocean, the ocean that Yasur had so boldly, forcefully and majestically thrust up and out of eons ago, as perhaps a gift to humans, forming this platform for fragile earthly life. I suppose, God or not, Yasur must be appreciated for that. The ancient ones surely thought so. Standing on the summit feeling the power of this beautiful, dangerous and majestic force, and viewing the jungle and the abundance of life within it below, seemingly created and protected by the volcano, yet serving at its whims, I can appreciate why.

This encounter, standing at the edge of an active volcano, was, without a doubt, one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. Along with the awe and inspiration, it stirred emotions and feelings unexpected and unsettling. As we sail now, away from Tanna and Mt. Yasur, it is with mixed emotion of relief and remorse: Relief for putting a distance of deep ocean water between

us and the obvious dangers of an active volcano, but also a remorse for leaving, after communing with this god like entity at such a close and familiar level – of exposing ourselves to the dangers and receiving in exchange, a feeling that can only be experienced by such close, intimate and vulnerable proximity. You simply cannot get the same feelings or experience watching National Geographic from the comfort and safety of a living room.

Yasur is revered as an ancient god, perhaps fallen from its former glory by more advanced societies, but still timeless, and majestic in its own right, its power and authority undeniable. It continues to demand a respect that transcends mere human understanding and rationality. A close and vulnerable audience with such a force, god or not, is a life time experience that will be difficult to top.