

The Inferno Cauldron



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

The sun set at about six in the afternoon and, just when I was enjoying a respite from the exhausting heat, Gere our guide rounded us up and pushed us to start trekking towards the summit of the mountain that appeared so insignificant in the fading light of dusk.

Our international group of 12 was made up of a Belgian couple, a German couple, a young couple and two women from Israel and 4 Malaysians. Three camels led the way; the first one carried one of the Israeli women and the other two carried provisions. It was a very gradual climb, but there was no clear path and the ground was uneven and tricky to negotiate. Despite the half-moon overhead, we had to switch on our head lamps to light the way and avoid the risk of twisting our feet or spraining an ankle.

The mountain we were ascending was actually a basaltic shield volcano known as Erta Ale, which meant "smoking mountain" in the local Afar language. It rises only 613m from its base in the Danakil Depression in northern Ethiopia, bordering Eritrea, but it has a large base diameter of about 40km as is typical of shield volcanoes.

The camp, Askoma, is home to 10 armed soldiers whose duty it is to

protect travellers visiting the volcano. This is also where travellers take shelter from the scorching sun, eat snacks and drink water to replenish their sapped energy as well as get ready to trek to the summit as soon as the sun sets.

My friends and I had travelled in a 4WD vehicle from Mekele into the Danakil Depression, meeting up with the other 8 members of the group in Abala village. The beautiful road we were travelling on initially was constructed by the Chinese some 3 years ago. At 1.30 p.m., we went off-road and over a large patch of very rough black lava rock before emerging on a sandy plain. Outside the air-conditioned vehicles, the air was hot as an oven. Yet even in such a desolate and hostile environment, we encountered half a dozen ostriches and a lonely bustard.

After a late lunch of rice with pea, potato, onion, canned tuna and meat in Kusrawad, a hamlet of a few shabby houses, we resumed our journey. Soon we had a second round of bone-shaking "African massage" as we went over extremely rough black lava rock for the next 12km to get to Askoma! It took more than 1½ hours to cover the 12km stretch before we arrived at 4.30 p.m.

Danakil Depression, with its lowest point at 125m below sea level and a year-round average temperature of 34°C, is the hottest place on earth. Measuring 200km by 50km, the depression was formed by a complex geological interaction between three tectonic plates and other forces of nature.

With three stops of 15 minutes each, we took 4 hours to reach the summit of Erta Ale. We were served a late dinner of macaroni on the northern rim of the old oblong crater that measured 1.7km by 600m. A pit crater of bubbling lava on the southern rim could be seen across the old crater. Gere led us down a steep slope into the old crater to get close to the cauldron of simmering molten rock, first going over hardened old lava rock and then over fragile new lava rock formed barely three weeks earlier. The new lava rock was dark grey in colour and hollow. Had the rock collapsed under our weight, our feet would have been severely cut by the sharp edges of the resulting crack. Gere tested the ground by pounding his wooden pole hard on the lava rock, and we followed him in a single file.

After 30 minutes, we came to a point about 10m from the smouldering cauldron. The new lava rock felt like charcoal beneath our feet and we could feel heat coming from not only the cauldron but also from the lava rock. On the way back to the crater rim, I found that I had lost the sole of one shoe and the other was on the verge of dropping off.

We spent the rest of the night lying on the crater rim and counting stars in the sky, absolutely satisfied that we had gotten really close to one of the few long-lasting lava lakes in the world. ■

