



Vanuatu's Volcanoes

Safety Valves of the Earth...

Explosive Yasur Volcano - Tanna Island
Photo: Michel Lardy - ORSTOM

By Michel Lardy

Vanuatu has exceptional examples of active volcanoes which can be viewed at close proximity. Each one has a character of its own, presenting a unique opportunity to witness nature's unbridled power. Read on to find out more about these awesome natural wonders and their importance in our world today.

Most of Vanuatu's islands are volcanic. They are believed to be not more than a few million years old, which is young compared to the estimated age of the Earth (four thousand five hundred million years old) or even the period when Dinosaurs were thought to have become extinct; some sixty five million years ago.

The birth of Vanuatu's volcanoes

The volcanic islands of the New Hebrides Archipelago (the geographic name for Vanuatu), are spread over a distance of one thousand kilometres. They were raised at the adjoining edges of two of the twelve large tectonic plates which form the Earth's crust, like the pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle (see fig. 1).

The vast convective stirring of matter deep within our planet (fig. 2) slowly moves

the continents, generating dynamics that are measurable in the human scale of time, but which represent a constant swirling dance in the scale of geological eras. These movements of the earth's crust are schematically indicated by arrows on figure 1. The matter which emerges out of the expansion zones (labelled "ridge" on figure 3), and which constitutes the plates, spreads out in the manner of a conveyor belt before plunging again into the depths of the earth's interior in areas known as subduction zones (figs. 2 & 3).

The Australian Plate, which is approaching at an average rate of 15cm a year, dives under the Pacific Plate in the region of Vanuatu. On the surface, this phenomenon is indicated by the presence of a vast oceanic trench, about 7000m deep. This motion results in the melting of the descending plates and a portion of the molten magma finds its way to the surface, where it forms live volcanoes. Every year, thousands of earth tremors bear witness to this subduction motion, only a few dozen of which can be felt by the residents of Vanuatu.

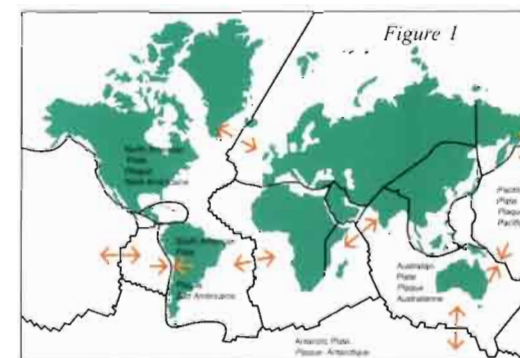
In subduction zones, the lava in the volcanoes is of thick consistency, and makes for an explosive form of vulcanism,

characteristic of about 25% of volcanic activity worldwide. The volcanoes of the New Hebrides Archipelago are part of the Pacific Rim's "Belt of Fire".

Yasur's constant activity

The dynamics of our Earth are easily observed in Vanuatu because there are several constantly active volcanoes.

On Tanna Island, Yasur Volcano is well known as being the most accessible active volcano in the world. You only have to walk a few metres from the parking area to reach the edge of the vast oval shaped crater (which measures 400 metres by 700 metres across) where you'll be astounded by the power and frequency of its strombolian



explosions. Although the base of the volcano is continually being remodelled by the activity, changing its shape from one month to the next, the lava is always expelled under gas pressure from three main vents. Yasur is constantly monitored by an observation station, located two kilometres from the crater on the ash plain, which transmits information, via satellite, to Port Vila. At certain periods it can be dangerous to go too close to the crater's edge. The National Tourism Office of Vanuatu ensures that all guides inform tourists of any current safety alert. Because the trajectory of the volcanic rocks that are ejected forcibly from the centre of the volcano cannot be predicted, there is always potential danger, so prudence is advised at all times.

Ambrym's lava lakes

Benbow and Maroum volcanoes on Ambrym Island (in actual fact they are not individual volcanoes but volcanic vents situated within a twelve kilometre wide caldera*) are less accessible than Yasur, unless you go by helicopter. Alternatively, if you are fit, you can trek the few hours to the caldera from Lalinda Village, on the south of the island, where you will find guides and carriers to accompany you. Access is equally possible from villages in the east and north of the island, but they are further away.

For several decades now lakes of lava have filled the crater pits of Benbow and Maroum. Maroum's lake measures 150 metres long by 50 metres wide. Continually escaping gases cause large spurts of lava to be expelled skywards, while the lava below bubbles constantly like a giant cauldron of molten iron. This provides a spectacular display, but the explosions always herald danger at the edge of the crater. The access to Benbow is easier and is very well known by the guides.

Central and Northern Volcanoes of the Archipelago

Other volcanoes in Vanuatu present different activities than those of Tanna and Ambrym islands. Fumaroles (smoke vents), hot springs, and boiling lakes which seem to have been alive for decades are all found at Suretamatai Volcano on Vanua-Lava Island in the Banks Group of northern Vanuatu. There is also a volcano on nearby Mere-Lava Island, but it has not been active since the beginning of this century.



Gemini
Photo: I. Hennequin RFO New Caledonia

The crater of Garet Volcano on the island of Gaua (also in the Banks Group) contains some 800 million cubic metres of water in which live enormous eels. A plume of gas is permanently emitted from the crater. Washed by tropical downfalls, in effect it

causes 'acid rain' to fall on the craterous zones at the summit of the island. You can find guides and carriers at the village of Namassari which lies some kilometres from the island's airstrip, but as flights to Gaua are limited each week, you will need to plan at least three days ahead to get there.

A young volcano

Lopevi Island, situated between Epi and Ambrym Islands, is actually the top of a volcano which emerges abruptly from the sea to a height of more than 1400 metres. One of the rare volcanoes of the archipelago which does not have a crater, Lopevi has displayed little activity over the past ten years.

An acid lake

Lombenben Volcano on Aoba (Ambae) Island is the most difficult one to reach and is also the most menacing of the archipelago. It is enormous, measuring nearly 4000 metres from the bottom of the ocean, of which we see only the 1500 metres appearing above sea level. In its entirety it is the largest volcano in Vanuatu, measuring approximately 2500 cubic kilometres. In 1995 it threatened part of the population of the island, necessitating the declaration of a 'state of emergency' with contingent plans for evacuation, should it have erupted.

The access to the lake of the crater of Vouli Volcano in Aoba (known as Lake of the Spirits) is also difficult and is via a very dense rainforest, after you have first obtained permission to visit from the local Chief. A permanent blanket of clouds above the crater makes observation from an aeroplane equally difficult.

Vanuatu's underwater volcanoes

Volcanoes sometimes emerge from the depths of the ocean. In 1989 ORSTOM discovered Gemini Volcano in the south of the archipelago, at a depth of 80 metres.

Figure 2 - Coupe de la terre



In February 1996 its activity caused it to rise up towards the surface of the sea (see photo page 14). Numerous other underwater volcanoes lie east of Epi Island and close to Erromango Island.

A few centuries ago, Tongoa and Epi islands themselves were once one large island with a volcanic mountain range down its centre. Around 1450, a massive and cataclysmic eruption rent the island in two. The explosion was felt all over the South Pacific and is the source of the Kuwae Legend which has survived down the generations to this day. Since then, the resulting Karua Volcano, which lies just a few metres under the sea, has tried to join the islands back together again.

It is estimated that the gigantic natural nuclear reactor which forms the core of the Earth will continue to produce heat for milliards (thousands of millions) of years to come. The volcanoes of the world, the Earth's safety valves, regulate the pressures of this fiery cauldron by allowing excess lava, gases and rocks to escape from the centre.

* Caldera: large crater

Michel Lardy is the Director of the Vanuatu office of ORSTOM. The Overseas Scientific and Technical Oceanographic Research Bureau (ORSTOM) is a French Government department which is represented in 30 countries around the world.

Most photographs have been kindly provided by ORSTOM.

To know more about volcanoes, you can read "Volcanoes, Fire from the Earth" by French Vulcanologist, Maurice Krafft. Thames & Hudson - New Horizons Collection.



Figure 3



bouches principales. L'activité de ce volcan est suivie en permanence à l'aide d'une station de surveillance située à 2 kilomètres du Yasur dans la plaine de cendres. Elle transmet, via un satellite, les données enregistrées vers Port-Vila. A certaines périodes, l'approche du volcan peut être dangereuse. L'Office du Tourisme et les guides vous en informeront. Il faut savoir que les trajectoires des bombes restent imprévisibles et qu'un danger potentiel subsiste. Il est important d'être toujours prudent.

Les lacs de lave d'Ambrym

Sur l'île d'Ambrym, l'accès aux bouches du Benbow et du Marum, situées à l'intérieur d'une caldeira* de 12 km de diamètre, est moins facile que sur Tanna, sauf si vous faites appel à l'hélicoptère. Par contre, si vous avez une bonne forme physique, vous pouvez les atteindre après quelques heures de marche depuis le village de Lalinda au sud de l'île où vous trouverez porteurs et guides.

Un accès plus long est également possible depuis les villages de l'est ou du nord de l'île. Depuis quelques décennies, des lacs de lave occupent les cratères du Benbow et du Marum. D'une dimension variable, mais actuellement d'environ 150 mètres de long sur 50 mètres de large, le lac de lave du cratère Mbwelesu (Marum) brassé en permanence par la remontée des gaz projette des lambeaux de lave. Le spectacle est grandiose mais les explosions présentent toujours un danger en bordure du cratère. La montée au Benbow est plus traditionnelle et les guides connaissent bien ce volcan qui renferme également un lac de lave.

Les volcans du centre et nord de l'Archipel

D'autres volcans du Vanuatu présentent une activité différente de celles des volcans des îles de Tanna et d'Ambrym. Au Banks, fumerolles, sources chaudes et mares bouillantes semblent se perpétuer depuis des décennies sur le Suretamatai dans l'île de Vanua-Lava. L'activité du cône de Mere-Lava semble stoppée depuis le début du siècle. Par ailleurs, la caldeira du volcan Garet sur l'île de Gaua contient quelques 800 millions de mètres cubes d'eau et d'énormes anguilles y ont élu domicile. Un panache gazeux est émis en permanence, nettoyé par les précipitations tropicales qui provoquent des pluies acides dans les zones sommitales de l'île. Il faut organiser la visite de Gaua sur trois jours (entre deux avions de la compagnie Vanair). On trouve guides et porteurs au village de Namassari à quelques kilomètres de l'aérodrome.

Un jeune volcan

Situé entre les îles d'Epi et d'Ambrym, le Lopevi qui émerge de façon abrupte de la mer culmine à plus de 1 400 mètres. Il est un des

rare volcan de l'archipel sans caldeira. Ses dernières manifestations importantes remontent à une dizaine d'années.

Un lac acide

L'île d'Aoba (Ambae) reste le volcan le plus difficile d'accès et le plus menaçant de l'archipel. Le Lombenben, dont la hauteur avoisine les 4 000 mètres depuis le fond océanique (près de 1 500 mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer) est le plus volumineux volcan du Vanuatu avec environ 2 500 km³. En 1995, suite à une reprise d'activité menaçante, une partie de la popu-



Left: Benbow & Maroum's vents on Ambrym Island
A gauche : Bouches des volcans d'Ambrym, Benbow & Maroum

Photo: Sonny Whitelaw



Centre: Aoba Island
The lakes of Lombenben in 1996
Manaro Vouï (acid lake) & Manaro Lakua (background)
Below: The same lakes in 1995.
Manaro Vouï exhuding vapors (foreground) & Manaro Lakua (background)

Ci-contre : Ile d'Aoba
Les lacs du Lombenben en 1996
Manaro Vouï (lac acide) & Manaro Lakua (en arrière plan)
Ci-dessous : les mêmes lacs en 1995. Manaro Vouï dégageant des vapeurs (au premier plan) & Manaro Lakua (en arrière plan)

Photo: A. Duvier VANAIR

lation de l'île a été mise en état d'alerte pour une éventuelle évacuation. L'accès au lac de cratère Vouï (lac des Esprits), reste très difficile au travers d'une forêt très dense. Il est préférable d'obtenir une autorisation des Chefs Coûtu-miers avant d'envisager une ascension. Une couverture nuageuse quasi-permanente rend son observation par avion également difficile.

Les volcans sous-marins du Vanuatu

Enfin, des profondeurs de la mer émergent parfois des volcans. En 1989, au sud de l'archipel, un navire de l'ORSTOM prélevait, sur un volcan sous-marin, à quelques 80 mètres de profondeur, des roches qui témoignaient d'une activité récente. En février 1996, le volcan Gémini tenta de faire surface (photo page 14).

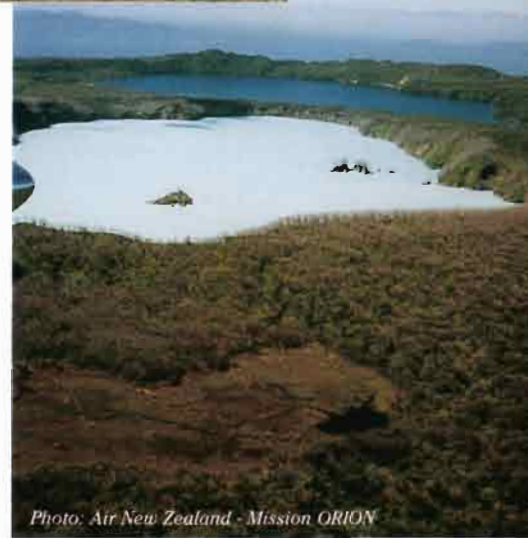


Photo: Air New Zealand - Mission ORION

Michel Lardy est le Directeur de l'ORSTOM au Vanuatu. L'Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération (ORSTOM) est un établissement du gouvernement français, qui est présent dans une trentaine de pays dans le monde. En collaboration avec le Département des Mines et de la Géologie du Vanuatu et d'un technicien Ni-Vanuatu en formation, l'ORSTOM installe des systèmes de surveillance sur quelques volcans de l'Archipel.

La plupart des photos ont été gracieusement fournies par l'ORSTOM.

Pour en savoir plus: "Les feux de la terre, Histoire de volcans", Maurice Krafft, Collection Découvertes Gallimard.

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