

CRIS TOALA OLIVARES

LIVING WITH
VOLCANOES

TERRA

*"If you are you, breathe. If you breathe, you talk. If you talk, you ask. If you ask, you think.
If you think, you search. If you search, you experience. If you experience, you learn. If you learn, you grow.
If you grow, you wish. If you wish, you find. And if you find, you doubt. If you doubt, you question.
If you question, you understand and if you understand, you know. If you know, you want to know more.
If you want to know more, you are alive."*

National Geographic Society

PROLOGUE

Walking over dark ashes through billowing smokes and hot gases, what grabs my attention on any volcano is the hissing and roaring sound from deep beneath the earth. Volcanoes 'announce' their impending explosions. Their unmistakable screams can be heard from thousands of kilometers away. Even before coming into view of spewing molten lava, the rumbling volcano invokes fear in anyone within reach. But for me, it was this call from volcanoes that ignited my desire for connecting humans and nature; one that would eventually lead me back to my origin and childhood in Ecuador, my ancestral land.

I was born in Ecuador under the shadows of Mount Monte Cristo, an extinct volcano. Growing up, I heard colorful legends and myths about Ecuador's fiery volcanoes in the Andes, from Alexander von Humboldt's exploration of Chimborazo to iconic Cotopaxi, the world's highest active volcano. Their unadulterated beauty and power were utterly captivating to me as a child, especially told through the lore of the indigenous people, with their dark magic, ancient medicines, and healing shamans that are still present in virtually every Ecuadorian community today.

After my father's death in Ecuador, I found myself practically homeless. My mother had left for the Netherlands hoping for a better life. I was a street-wise kid living in uncertainty and poverty without parental protection or a roof over my head.

Eventually following my mother to Europe, I learned new languages, culture, people and life's purpose. Seeking a more stable future for myself, I worked hard to find my own footing and fit in. I briefly studied medicine before stumbling upon photography while volunteering in hospitals in war-torn Gaza in 2009. For the first time, I realized clearly photography was what I was meant to do with my life. Right then and there I found my true vocation and medium. Becoming a photographer felt like destiny.

Watching Tungurahua explode in 2014 was a turning point in my career. It was there I took my first 'volcano' photograph. By then I had documented urban life, wars and natural disasters as a photojournalist for various news outlets and magazines. But there was something special about erupting volcanoes and the peoples who coexist with them that drew me in like no other subjects. Awe-struck by Tungurahua's sheer volcanic energy, I envisioned a project focusing on my life-long interest in volcanoes. Little did I know how much I would evolve professionally and personally through this journey, which would take me to far-flung corners of the world chasing volcanoes for nearly a decade. During that time, I also became a father to Inez, named after my grandmother who shares my indigenous roots in Ecuador.

From 2014 to 2021, I traveled extensively to document the rapidly changing dynamics of

landscape between nature and humanity, including 13 volcanoes featured in this book. These trips had many close calls with me being thrust into the epicenter of formidable natural forces; none was closer than when I was nearly consumed by a deadly pyroclastic flow while working at point zero in Sinabung, Indonesia in 2014. Recorded as one of the region's most destructive eruptions, more than 33,000 inhabitants were forced to evacuate. I noticed though with many long-time residents, whether in Volcán de Agua or the Fogo volcano, that they would choose to remain in their homes despite looming dangers of constant volcanic threats. Volcanic soils often yield nutrient-rich, fertile plains to farm and grow foods—critical resources for locals. Villagers in these areas have formed a unique bond with volcanoes over centuries of worship, sacrifice and disasters. They understand that volcanoes give life as much as they may take lives. This intricate relationship between volcanoes and their inhabitants continues precariously.

From Ecuador to Indonesia, and from Iceland to Italy, I saw repeatedly a common thread emerging from the people habituated to volcanoes: absolute respect for nature and gratitude. Practicing these virtues for nature was deeply engrained in daily rituals of locals I met and spent time with. They make sure to thank Pachamama—the Mother Earth—before they nourish their body and go about their day. For most living, breathing creatures on earth, volcanoes are no easy place to dwell. The locals are acutely aware how their very survival and existence in this intensely hostile environment actually depends on the mercy of volatile volcanoes.

Witnessing the volcanoes and learning from the people who live amid these creations of mother nature encouraged me to look differently at nature and humans. Nature has always been an integral part of who we are. Appreciating volcanoes and resilience of people who are stewards of these powerful natural forces has also been a source of my own healing and rediscovery. I was able to connect with the essence of life and with that, I was

able to become closer to my true being, history and family that is the center of my universe.

Cotopaxi, seen as the father of the volcanoes in Ecuador, is called Taita—Quichuan for father. I was there to capture Cotopaxi's first eruption, which broke the 100 years of dormant period. Camping out in the nature reserve in the shadow of the eruption, I experienced deep spiritual and emotional awakening as my entire body felt the strength of the mighty father. I was deeply touched. Back home in Amsterdam, I reunited with my wife Alice Wielinga, a seasoned photographer and artist in her own right. She had just returned from her own trip to Iceland, a land filled with female volcanoes where she made offerings to mother nature, according to a wisdom I had shared with her from the indigenous people.

Two month later, we were expectant. When our daughter was born, she had a red dot right on top of her head. I tell everyone that she is indeed a gift from the volcanoes Alice and I each encountered. Inez was baptized on the black shores of Stromboli, Italy where I had a privilege of observation and time with its generous people during many trips to document their lives under the "Lighthouse of the Mediterranean."

I was once told that everyone has a mission when they are born. I have no doubt that mine was chosen by volcanoes to capture their stories to share with the world. Chasing volcanoes, I found my own tribe and harmony with Pachamama. This book is a testimony to my mission for documenting these harsh realities and beauty to educate and inspire people to be closer to nature and to be more attuned to the needs of Mother Earth we have long neglected and abused. My family has now moved to Friesland, living close to wonders of the natures all around us, including Waddenzee, where I continue to work and photograph.





INTRODUCTION

FORCE OF NATURE

Volcanoes have long fascinated people, and many artists and photographers have sought to convey the awe they generate and the destruction they can unleash. In the news, we tend to hear about them most often when their eruptions are causing the greatest devastation, fuelling catastrophic events such as tsunamis and forcing mass evacuations. In the more than eight years that I have spent focusing on this subject, what has intrigued me most is exploring the day-to-day relationship between volcanoes and the people that live around them. The quest began in my native land Ecuador and took me to places as far-flung as Indonesia and Cape Verde, meeting people from different countries and traditions.

Despite the distances and differences, what I observed as I spent time with these communities living close to volcanoes is that they share more characteristics than you might expect. I did not find myself experiencing much culture shock as I moved from one country to the other. In fact, the way of life started to seem familiar no matter where I was. Many of us inhabiting modern towns and cities might view life next to a volcano as a wild and dangerous choice. We might also prefer a more technologically advanced lifestyle, rather than what could be viewed as a rural and old-fashioned existence. But I noticed that the people I met around volcanoes over the years had a lot of hidden knowledge and wisdom, some of which I hope to bring across in this book.

Among the common values I came to appreciate in the people I encountered, I observed a deep respect for nature. In most cases, this revolves around the reverence that is felt for the nearby volcano. Having such an unpredictable and powerful neighbour helps put things into perspective and reminds people they are a small part in a larger interconnected world, fostering a sense of humility. Regularly dealing with intense feelings such as fear and stress, many of them also have a great ability to understand and manage emotions. Due to the uncertainty that comes with this way of life, I saw how people approach one day at a time, focusing on the present, and not worrying too much about what the future could hold. They also share a strong bond with the place they are from, which makes them willing to face the risks associated with their unique livelihoods. This bond is often linked to their loyalty and devotion to family, which extends to the volcano and the nature around them. Though they may not be connected on the internet daily like many people nowadays, they are connected to their natural surroundings and work outside every day, so they are highly alert to changes in their environment and quick to spot dangers. This also leads to an awareness of how to take care of the Earth and make best use of the landscape and vegetation around them for their food and medicinal needs.

Although volcanoes are of course a frightening and fearsome force of nature and wreak havoc around

the world, I wanted to convey their giving as well as their destructive side. This is seen for example in the fertile soils near to them, which locals tend to be very grateful for. They also provide people with energy, both in terms of geothermal power for homes and industry as well as a feeling of warmth and charge in daily life that people in several places I visited spoke of. The rich benefits offered by life beside a volcano also make inhabitants more accepting when there is an eruption, as in many places there is an understanding that all cycles have different stages, and this is partly the way nature achieves balance.

Another aspect I came across in many countries is the inspiration that people receive from volcanoes, leading to the growth of several local myths around them as well as creative pursuits from the sculpting of stones in Stromboli, Italy, to painting in North

Korea. I also experienced that inspiration, and it propelled me forward on my ventures to discover volcanoes around the globe. When choosing which volcanoes to cover, I did not opt for the most famous or the most discussed in today's media. Instead, I followed my intuition and looked for less well-known places that nevertheless had interesting connections with local people and many compelling stories told about them. I tried to capture their majesty from all angles: both from the ground and the air, through wide panoramic shots and close-up detail, sometimes looking into their craters, as well as their varying interactions with people, their uses, and their effects. I hope that by bringing them together in this book I can spread the inspiration that volcanoes and our natural world provide to everyone who reads it and sees my pictures.

Cris Toala Olivares

TUNGURAHUA

ECUADOR

Tungurahua in my native country Ecuador was the first volcano that became a subject for my pictures, and it inspired my journey around the world. Lying about 130 kilometres south of the capital Quito, its name means “throat of fire” in the indigenous Quechua language, according to some interpretations. In ancient legends, the warriors Cotopaxi and Chimborazo, which are the names of other volcanoes nearby, were rivals for the love of “Mother Tungurahua” as it is known locally.

These are myths that I grew up with in Ecuador and that have always intrigued me. Since 1999, the 5,023-metre Tungurahua has resumed activity, and when I heard it was erupting again in 2014 while I was on assignment in the country, I knew I had to go to see it.

During the drive over, my colleague and I came to a junction in the road. He said one way would take us to the usual site for journalists to photograph Tungurahua and the other way would take us to “La Casa del Árbol” (The Treehouse), an observation point near Baños set up by local Carlos Sánchez. As I hoped for some beautiful and artistic pictures, I chose the second option.

Not long after we reached the treehouse where Sánchez monitors the volcano and has built a swing from which people can view it, a series of eruptions started. We were in the ideal place to see the huge

“pyroclastic” hot ash cloud emerge, but luckily, it was not coming towards us. Instead, it went towards the more common observation site for reporters, though fortunately they had all left by then. I was glad my intuition had led me in the other direction.

After a particularly big explosion, when others were running away from the treehouse, I stayed and tried to capture some striking angles. I remember feeling alone with my subject, Tungurahua. I was scared but I tried to whisper to the volcano that I just wanted to catch her best side, like a painter might say when trying to depict a person. There was a gentle evening light descending as the ash cloud swirled and I was able to take some fantastic portraits. I think she showed me the reason for her “throat of fire” name.

During this time in Ecuador, I met several people who lived around Tungurahua, including flower growers and farmers. I wanted to know why they had made this place their home, and what they were like. They led humble, simple lives, but they were content and close to their land and to the volcano, which they saw as a protective maternal figure. Sánchez told me many other local legends linked to magic and mythology in the area. It was this initial experience that convinced me to start travelling the globe to find out more about volcanoes and the people who live near to them.



































