



WALKING ON

WHILE TRAVELLING TO THE MOON IS OUT OF REACH (FOR NOW), WHITE ISLAND MIGHT JUST BE THE NEXT BEST OPTION. **EMILY MCAULIFFE** TAKES US INSIDE NEW ZEALAND'S MOST ACTIVE VOLCANO.



THE MOON

A white plume on the horizon looks to be low-hanging cloud, oddly hovering in the distance on an otherwise clear day. The hazy outline of an island then starts to bounce in and out of view as our boat smacks across the ocean. As we inch closer, it's apparent the so-called cloud is being puffed skyward.

Before us lies one of New Zealand's most beautiful islands, although not in a conventional sense. Instead of leis, we have gas masks strung around our necks, and in place of sun hats we don helmets, because in this context, tropical island is code for live volcano. And we're about to charge straight into its rumbling, grumbling core.

A CHEQUERED HISTORY

White Island, or Whakaari, sits 49 kilometres off New Zealand's north coast in the Bay of Plenty, on a restless fault line that thwarts dormancy. On a good day – most days – the marine volcano breathes heavily, channelling twills of steam through vents in the earth with a hiss and occasional growl. Small streams run piping hot across the pebbled ground and pools of magma hide beneath crusty mounds of calcium sulphate. 'Calm' days are interspersed with the odd tantrum that throws lava bombs and showers the island with thick ash, reminders that the volcano is very much alive and has been for centuries.

White Island was so-named by Captain James Cook in 1769. He noted the island's candyfloss appearance as he

sailed past but didn't venture close enough to realise it was a volcano. It would be almost another 60 years until Europeans set foot on the land. While the volcanic soil was somewhat pungent, it smelled of opportunity, and a mine was established in 1885 to extract sulphur to use as fertiliser. The mine operated for a year before an eruption on the mainland sparked fears of a similar (non-eventual) explosion on White Island, and the property was put on the market.

After a string of sales and subsequent bankruptcy of the mine, a factory and living quarters were built on White Island in 1913. It was then that real disaster struck. In September 1914 the south-western wall of the crater collapsed onto the mine, toppling buildings and killing all 10 workers. The sole survivor was a cat named Peter, who went on to father a premium line of 'lucky' kittens and was bestowed the honourable title of Peter the Great.

Once the disaster's dust settled, a last-ditch mining attempt was made in 1923, but lasted just a decade before it too succumbed to bankruptcy. The rich but difficult land was put up for sale yet again and was privately purchased.

The New Zealand government tried to buy the island in the 1950s but the owners refused, because, let's face it, a property portfolio that includes a volcano brings enviable street cred. Instead they agreed to declare the island a private scenic reserve. Since then commercial access has been tightly restricted, with White Island Tours, who I'm joining today, operating the only boat trips. >>

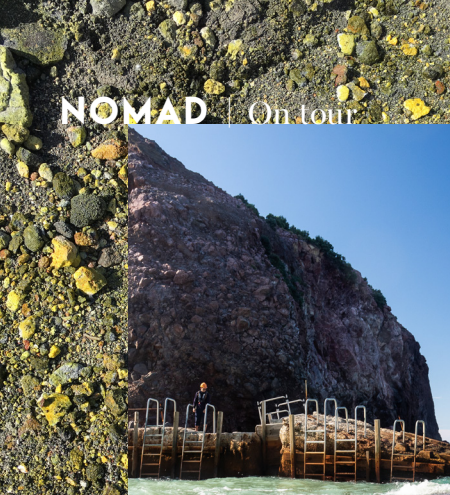


CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Dolphins are often spotted on the journey to White Island; A thick cloud of smoke billows from the active volcano; Walking across the barren volcanic landscape; Mother Nature's unpredictability means visitors are required to wear hard hats while on tour.



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CLOCKWISE FROM

LEFT: Approaching White Island via an inflatable motorised boat; Gas masks are provided in case the sulphur dioxide becomes too much; Walking towards the main crater.



DETAILS

GETTING THERE

White Island Tours depart from Whakatane on the north coast of New Zealand with transfers available from Tauranga and Rotorua. From \$220 per adult and \$125 per child (15 years and under). whiteisland.co.nz

THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED

When our anchor drops into the turquoise water of a calm bay we gather eagerly at the back of the boat. A motorised inflatable zips across the shallows and we pile onto the island's small concrete jetty to receive a safety briefing from our guides Kelsey and David. There's always risk when rouletting with Mother Nature, but we're reassured that seismographs monitoring the island's mood have pegged her at a composed level one today.

Top and tailed by our guides, we set off in single file towards the centre of the volcano and any nerves are quickly overcome by wonder as an alien landscape unfolds before us. It's easy to see why the island was used as a backdrop for films such as *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, as there are definite savings to be had on the smoke machines.

As if on cue, about five minutes into the walk everyone starts to cough. The smell of the acidic steam billowing either side of us isn't particularly offensive, but its sulphur dioxide content has bite. We're instructed to breathe through our gas mask if it becomes too much, and given steam temperatures can reach up to 300°C, we're certainly not to touch it.

Our shoes crunch across vibrant yellow sulphur crystals that glisten in the sun as we make our way to the main crater. Upon reaching the ridge we stop in awe. "Good view at the office, huh?" smiles Kelsey as we look out over a goliath cauldron of milky green water, licked by thick curls of white steam. As testament to the ever-changing landscape, we're told the rain-filled crater only began forming in 1976 and its fluctuating mineral content can shift the colour from blue to red to green. It's like a giant science experiment.

Although most beautiful, the area near the lake is the most unpredictable, so after a quick photo op we head back towards the bay to see the remains of the last mining operations. To our left we hear a rumble akin to a jet preparing for take-off and clear streams quietly

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bubble at our feet. "Try some," says David as he dips his hand in the warm water and licks his fingers. "You can taste it but unfortunately can't drink it. This was one of the hardest things for the miners living here as they relied on water deliveries from supply ships," he says.

As we approach a cluster of crumbling brick walls, David continues to explain the tribulations of the island's former labour force. "Because a group of workers lost their lives in a landslide while sleeping near the mine here, the next group built their camp on another part of the island and used to scramble up there to reach it," he says, pointing to an almost vertical rocky incline ahead. "You can see why some men decided to chance it some nights rather than take that path back. They used to call it the 'dreaded track'."

Despite the almost unfathomable living conditions, many considered the pay worthwhile to support their struggling families between world wars. One miner, who presumably liked the income or didn't like his family, called the island home for eight long years. While I admire his tenacity, I can't imagine subscribing to a life on what may as well be another planet. Visiting White Island for the day is another story however, and is an incredible reminder of the beauty and power of the Earth. It's also a damn sight more achievable than visiting the Moon. ▀