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Mount Yasur on Tanna, Vanuatu, is one of the world's most accessible active volcanoes. Image by Caroline Riches/AAP PHOTOS

TOURISM AND LEISURE

Vanuatu's lighthouse of the Pacific

By Caroline Riches

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In the daylight hours, volcanoes aren't that spectacular. They can roar and rumble, they can spit and steam. In darkness, wild wind and slashing rain, it's another story entirely.

These are the conditions this evening around Mount Yasur, on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu. Against a sky aglow with pink and orange, the rain tears through the mist and ash erupting from way down below. It's like a smoke machine and stage lights setting the stage for drama.

We hope there will be none tonight. It's only weeks since the eruption of New Zealand's White Island volcano, which has left 21 people dead, and I had wondered whether to visit Yasur at all.

Tanna's volcano is one of the world's most accessible active volcanoes. She's suffering from the world's oldest case of heartburn; erupting several times an hour for the last 800 years. Visible from the ocean, her colourful emissions earned Yasur the handle "Lighthouse of the Pacific".

These are Strombolian – relatively mild discharges that cause a shower of lava fragments and little else. Anything stronger comes with a warning which, we're told, scientists haven't recently detected.

White Island's fatal eruption, meanwhile, was hydrothermal, caused by steam rather than magma. These are harder to predict, and while short-lived, can be catastrophic.

We head off to Yasur mid-afternoon from White Grass Ocean Resort and Spa, Tanna's premier accommodation on the other side of the island, to coincide our arrival with dusk. After an hour of bumpy roads she appears through mountain foliage as a dark, smoking cone. Before long our 4WD is traversing the ashy, black moonscape that surrounds her. And then, after a 15-minute uphill trek, we stand at the edge of her 400-metre-diameter crater.

Wind whips our hair as we clutch the railing in trepidation. We glare down into Yasur's steaming cauldron as it belches and gathers steam before letting out a deafening roar that stuns us. Only then does she hurl lava rocks into the air – still way below us. I'm completely wowed.

We walk around the crater for a couple of hours, waiting for the grumble then the spew of lava that follows. Yasur is powerful window into the primal energy of the earth's core. And as the sun sucks the grey from the clouds, this window shines a fiery light onto the black sky that beckons across the water.

As we walk back down from the crater around 7pm, some local families are taking a barefoot walk up before their children go to bed. They probably wander up here all the time.

An hour later, the indulgences of fine wine and poulet fish from the White Grass menu is a world away from Yasur's primeval fury. The 1500 active volcanoes in the world are constantly tracked by experts. None are completely predictable, and to visit one is both a risk and a privilege. But experiencing the power of the world beneath our own through Yasur's window is the highlight of my trip to the archipelago.

The volcano is the main drawcard to Tanna, and if she is all that you see, the trip is well worth it. But there is so much more to this rugged island.

If it's scenery you're after, Tanna offers a stunning limestone coastline studded with blue caves and white sandy beaches. Inland there are coffee plantations, highland tribal cultures and the famous John Frum Cult, so named after a supposed US World War II serviceman who is expected to bring his worshippers wealth and prosperity.

All trips and activities can be organised through White Grass. Or you can rest and soak up the resort's amenities: its blue swimming holes, beach volleyball, the spa set among the ocean rocks and the cosy lounge area offering cocktails, books, old-fashioned board games and plenty of traveller talk.

As I doze that night in our spacious cabin, my mind keeps wandering back to Yasur, boiling incessantly in the dark, her lava rocks appearing through her ashy mist. To the locals she's not only an income source but a spiritual compass, an affirming reminder of the force of nature. They live in harmony with her, they respect her and she is unlikely to bother them without warning.

The following day, as we leave Tanna, I scan the horizon for one last glimpse of Mount Yasur. If she's there, I miss her. It's daytime after all – she's just another mountain.

Come nightfall, she'll glow again.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Air Vanuatu flies from many Australian cities to Vanuatu's capital Port Vila, with regular connecting flights available to Tanna. Visit airvanuatu.com.

STAYING AND PLAYING THERE: A 15-minute drive from the airport, White Grass Ocean Resort and Spa provides the most luxurious accommodation on the island. It offers a selection of bures and villas with prices starting from \$A300 twin share, including breakfast. The resort can also organise all activities, including volcano tours.

For more, visit whitegrasstanna.com

The writer travelled as a guest of White Grass Ocean Resort and Spa.

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