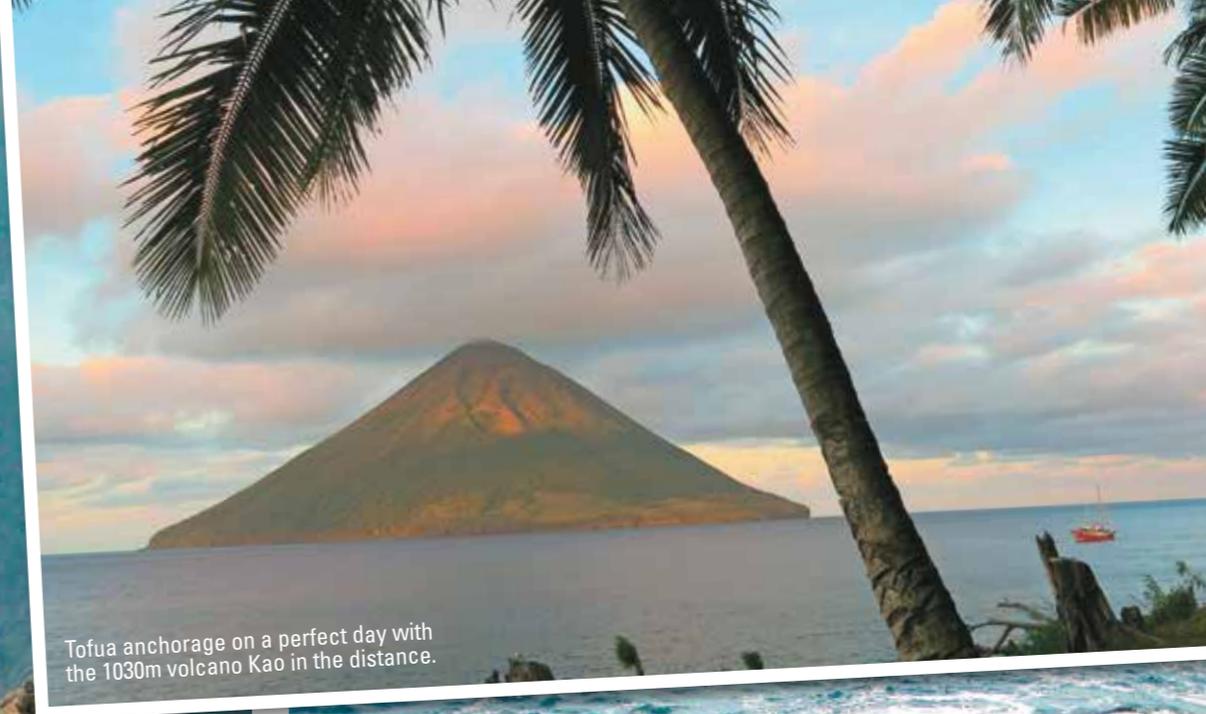




House-size hole through the roof over the lava lake surging below – the Devil's Cauldron! Fortunately, all was quiet.



Tofua anchorage on a perfect day with the 1030m volcano Kao in the distance.



Two at a time we jump onto Tofua before the dinghy drops a metre with the ground swell... and this is a perfect day!

VULCAN'S FORGE

It's a red hot adventure on Tonga's Tofua Island

I am not easily scared, but on a sunny day in October I lay frozen, anxious, apprehensive and silent peering into a steaming abyss, bottomed with a surging lake of lava.

Something told me I should not be there... but I did not want to leave.

I climbed my first volcano on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu, in 1978. I did it numerous times over many days and nights dodging lava bombs and sulphur gas clouds. I had sailed there from Adelaide in my 29ft yacht *Skye*. The lava didn't kill me but the mozzies nearly did. I contracted a deadly form of malaria on that island and spent 10 days in hospital in Australia with only the fourth recorded case of that strain of the disease. Since then I have seen volcanoes in New Zealand, Antarctica, the Philippines and

Tonga. The most dramatic is by far on the island of Tofua in Tonga.

Getting there is not for the fainthearted. There is no real anchorage, no protection from the swell and no landing site to beach a dinghy. Jagged rock walls pounded by swell are your welcome. If you arrive on a perfect day, co-ordinate your jump from the dinghy with the surge to get ashore unscratched before facing a tough 90-minute slog. The huge crater rim, more than a mile across, is 550m straight up into the clouds along a jungle track scattered with orchids. Following the rim you balance carefully along a ridge for another 30 minutes to finally look down on what is truly one of the secret wonders of the world.

Half the old crater is filled with a brilliant blue freshwater lake surrounded by lush, green foliage. The other half is a moonscape of long-cooled lava rocks, ash and

volcanic mud, spewed from the centre of the earth and now set like concrete. In the midst of this is the current mini volcano vent, smoking, exploding and pulsating with the constant roar of a gushing steam. Occasionally you see rocks and lava fly over its rim.

For most, that is as close as you would want to get to something so unpredictable, so powerful, so loud and so bloody scary. During my second visit to Tofua last year one of my crew made it down the 350m into the old crater and up to the rim of that vent. He looked down into what he described as the bowels of the earth, a devil's cauldron. It was something that changed his life! On that day, he was the only one in our team to make it.

CURIOSITY CALLS

I first came to Tofua with my Talisker Bounty Boat Expedition in April 2010, then again last year

with the landscape photographer Steve Fraser. While I took pictures from the rim with Steve, I watched with envy as my abovementioned crew went down. Now I needed to see inside for myself. Easier said than done! We set off from ICE at 0730hrs to jump onto the island, starting the climb to the crater at 0900hrs and by 1130hrs looking down at the vent from last year's photo position.

We followed the crater rim encountering scenery reminiscent of Mars or a lost planet where there appears to be no living thing. Then we started down a gully washout of jagged, loose volcanic rocks. Fortunately dry now but a river in the wet season that would be quite impressive to see. It was simply dangerous as it was unpredictable. A 45-minute treacherous drop, 350m down with random foot and handholds breaking free making things quite challenging! With aching muscles powered

by adrenalin we were happy to finally enter the old crater. Looking around I would not have been surprised to see dinosaurs. Finally an opportunity offered in just a few places on this planet was close at hand!

To our surprise the final run was an easy, exciting, nervous and apprehensive climb up that mini volcano. It only takes about 10 minutes. You feel the power in all your senses, not just the roar in your ears. It is a perfect cone made of sharp lava fragments with a crumbly edge at the top. You lie on your stomach, your fingers on the rim. Wide eyed, heart pumping, looking over your shoulder expecting the unexpected you peer into the hole.

Anticipation and plain fear grips Sulphur gas in the air, strange sounds and rumblings made it hard to relax when so close peering into the bowels of the earth.



There are plenty of ways to fall off, or into the large crater, while traversing the ridge but the views both sides are out of this world.

ONLY IN THE MIDST OF AN ANTARCTIC MID-WINTER BLIZZARD HAVE I FELT LESS SIGNIFICANT



The first people to see this volcano in nine months. Happy to see it but we still cannot touch it yet, the hard part is about to begin, dropping down into this spectacular place.



On top of the first ridge and happily exhausted to be there. You can see the other Ha'apai islands 35 miles away.

[VOLCANO] HOW TO?

Tofua is an easy day-sail from the Ha'apai Islands group in Tonga. I will come again. The place makes you feel alive from within like nowhere else. It is spooky too!

This is an adventure available to any sailor with imagination and basic fitness but strangely, most cruising Tonga sail straight past. You can happily anchor 30 miles from Tofua to await the right weather. Dropping the anchor in the NNE corner of Tofua you can roll gunwale to gunwale but the holding is okay.

Once your crew is deposited on Tofua get someone to return the dinghy to your boat. That last person swims back 100m to climb the rocks. After a grand adventure ashore, someone jumps off the rocks to swim back and collect the dinghy. What a day! Ours ended on ICE at 1900hrs.

We walked a round trip of nearly six miles, not to mention all the ups and downs. We all had aching muscles for the next few days and at some point during that day we were all quite scared, if not from the volcano, then from the (at times) treacherous climb in and out to the vent.

All of the team are just ordinary people but each of us walked away with something very special. Next year I may camp in the crater and watch in the dark. It will be a two-week expedition in September and I have room for just four more participants. Interested? For details, click on bluetreasure.me

you. You dare to trespass and peek at forces beyond your control. One hundred metres below, just spitting distance, a lava lake of molten rock is boiling, plop, plop. There it is the heartbeat of the earth. WOW!

You cannot see the whole lava lake. Instead, you look down through a "keyhole" in the ceiling of a larger cavity beneath. Inside you can see 2m waves of boiling magma and lava sloshing around. Explosions send great dollops out through that hole. Who knows how big the lava lake is, but the keyhole is the size of a big house and the surface of the lake is about 10m below that ceiling. On the side there are other red-hot glowing

holes through that roof and beside that, the steam vents. It is quite simply, unbelievable and inspiring.

SLEEPING GIANT

We were lucky. This giant was asleep while we were there. Sulphur fumes engulfed us occasionally, (not good for your health), but the show went on! Only in the midst of an Antarctic mid-winter blizzard have I felt less significant.

On top of this sensory overload you just know that very few people will ever and have ever come here. Disneyland it is not! No tickets for this ride. You have to earn it. This is a very real mini adventure. 🌋