

Global Geotourism Perspectives

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Active Geothermal and Volcanic Environments as Tourist Destinations

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Active Geothermal and Volcanic Environments as Tourist Destinations

Patricia J Erfurt-Cooper

Introduction

Tourism is often perceived as a potential threat to the natural environment. However, some natural environments, such as active geothermal and volcanic geotopes can pose threats to tourists as well, with possible geophysical risks and hazards that are often underestimated. Active geothermal and volcanic areas are widely popular (Rosi *et al.*, 2004), but potentially dangerous destinations, although they offer tourists exciting visual attractions and activities such as hiking, trekking or climbing in order to access remote locations. Every year, large numbers of people visit geological attractions based on geothermal phenomena such as geysers, steaming lakes, and boiling mud ponds. Lava flows, rift valleys and igneous rock formations are highly sought-after attractions, which are often paired with hot spring spas for health and leisure purposes. When tourists are looking for fresh experiences of an adventurous nature they may choose volcanic environments, which are known for their unusual and interesting landscapes, as well as for their unpredictable and potentially hostile nature. Although safety is generally an important aspect in destination choice, visitors of active volcanic and geothermal environments are venturing into possibly hazardous areas and are not always aware of the dangers of volcanic activity. Key factors in the importance of volcanic and geothermal environments are their occurrence in many countries worldwide and their resulting economic value and they can thus make a significant contribution to local revenue from tourism. Long-term sustainability of a relatively renewable natural resource and geodiversity are other important aspects of active geothermal and volcanic environments as destinations for geotourism.

To date volcano tourism has not received much attention in the tourism literature (Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper, 2007; Erfurt-Cooper, 2007) nor has it been the subject of research as an independent category of geotourism, a new direc-

tion that includes nature-based tourism having a main focus on the physical environment and the global geological heritage. With an increasing amount of people taking part in geotourism, active and dormant volcanic and geothermal areas represent a considerable attraction within this category. Tourists are looking for fresh experiences of an adventurous nature particularly in volcanic environments, which are known for their unusual and interesting landscapes, but also for their unpredictable and potentially hostile nature. Many of these areas are also found in national parks (Sutherland and Britton, 1995; Sigurdsson, 2000; Atkinson and Atkinson, 2001; Decker and Decker, 2007) with varying degrees of access or are world heritage listed, which adds a further dimension to their interest. This chapter describes some volcanic areas that are used as destination examples here to demonstrate the significant contribution of volcano tourism to the tourism industry of individual regions. Serious thought is given to the attendant risk factors for tourists and the potential danger in areas with proximity to active volcanoes and their related manifestations like extremely hot springs and geysers.

Volcano tourism in history

Volcano tourism has been widespread in European and other countries for centuries (Krafft, 1991; Fisher *et al.*, 1997; Sigurdsson, 2000; Kilburn and McGuire, 2001; Rosi *et al.*, 2004; Schmincke, 2004; Lopes, 2005), with active mountains such as Vesuvius and the buried cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum generally included in the 'Grand Tour' undertaken by more affluent members of society during the 18th and 19th centuries. The observation of volcanic activity was in those times considered educational and inspirational as well as fashionable. The geothermal phenomena and volcanics of Iceland have also attracted tourists for several centuries as has been documented in the literature (Hróarsson and Jónsson, 1992; Thordarson and Hoskuldsson, 2002). Geothermal manifestations such as geysers and other extreme hot spring activity were successfully promoted from the 18th century in order to attract visitors to this north-westernmost European country near the Arctic Circle. Other countries rich in geothermal resources such as New Zealand, Italy, Turkey, USA, Japan and China also have a history of marketing their volcanic environments to increase visitor numbers.

Visitor expectations

Today travel and recreation are often linked to nature-based destinations such as national parks which in many cases include volcanic and geothermal environments; with over 1300 active volcanoes worldwide and considerably more dormant which means an abundance of volcanic destinations, even if not all of these can be accessed. Many are already developed for tourists; others are not

Chapter extract

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