

Shooting at the Gates of Hell Sonny Whitelaw

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Yasur volcano on Tanna Island has been described as the world's most accessible volcano, and for good reason. Just an hour's flight from the capital, it's continuously active, yet a vehicle can drive you to within a short walk of the crater's rim.

If you haven't already booked a trip to Tanna, and you're keen to get the sort of great photos that are simply impossible to achieve on regular tours, go see The Adventure Centre in Port Vila (www.adventurevanuatu.com) and tell them what you have in mind.

Because Tanna has minimal infrastructure, you must take everything you need in the way of photographic equipment, including film and/or memory cards. Most hotels don't have 24-hour power so assume you can't charge batteries. If you need duty free photographic equipment, you purchase a wide selection from duty free stores like Sound Centre, located in the middle of Port Vila.

Try and stay on Tanna at least two nights, with your flight going down in the morning. Get the Adventure Centre to book you on a *day tour* to the volcano; however, you need to specify that you wish to be dropped off on the northern side of Lake Siwi while the rest of the tour group goes on to the crater. The vehicle generally stops here for a few minutes anyway, as it's the most scenic landscape angle *image 1*, but even on a fine day you'll need a few hours to get your shots, and set things up for the following morning. Here's why.

Yasur volcano is small, so unless it's erupting enthusiastically, your images will need an interesting foreground. Lake Siwi, gnarled trees, or better, unusual volcanic formations such as prehistoric mud bubbles, are good features. Take plenty of water, some food, sunscreen and hat, and wear decent walking shoes. In other words, go prepared for a day in the bush. You won't get lost, as it's very barren. It's also safe. Any locals walking by will invariably stop and chat. Just tell them you're waiting for the tour truck to collect you. You may even get them to model in your shots if you offer them a

few Vatu — the local currency. That's exactly what I did with the 'prehistoric mud bubbles' picture in *image 2*.

While you're scouting the area, you'll notice that eruptions from Yasur are generally mild. If you happen to be there when it's blowing voluminous clouds, that's great, but don't bank on it. On a two-dimensional image, even the ash and steam from the best eruption can be almost indistinguishable from the background cloud, as in *images 1, 2 and 11*. And there's almost always cloud, which adds to the 'I'll just wait until the sun comes out' factor. Use a 20-28mm lens, polarising filter, and if you find something interesting close to the ground, get down on your hands and knees and try shooting long and wide. Add a touch of fill-in flash if the feature is very dark — but leave that polarising filter on if there's sunlight. I know it sounds odd to use both, especially in the midday sun, but it's necessary to cut glare while still correctly exposing the incredibly light absorbing volcanic surfaces.

Catch the tour vehicle on the return trip an hour or two later, or if they're running an afternoon tour, stay longer, cross Lake Siwi by the road bridge, and climb part of the way up the ashy, northwest face of the volcano. If you're really well prepared, you can wait at the base until the vehicle goes by — generally before sunset — for the night tour. Don't bother to do this in the hope of getting great sunset shots, though, because the volcano is so small that it's in the shadow of the western mountains.

Remember, you need to specify that this is what you want to do, when booking. And you need to double check with the vehicle driver and guide that they're aware of your plans. You can't just book on any old volcano tour and hope to be set down and picked up when and where you feel like it.

If you chose to go on the normal day tour instead, shots on the rim can still be interesting, and the experience is unforgettable. However, it's like photographing fireworks during the day. The really spectacular images require more work, and are best done after dark.

Let's say you've done the day tour and stayed around the base. You will then also need to book on the night tour, or make a special arrangement to combine both. Night shots require a sturdy tripod, remote or cable shutter release, an umbrella, a bottle of water, some Wet Ones or equivalent, lens cleaning cloths and blower brush. Bring a flash if you want to photograph other people standing on the rim as in this digital self-portrait in *image 3*, but most of your work will be natural light. A waterproof camera case also is preferable. Wear old or grubby clothes, preferably covering your knees so you don't get them bloody. Take a jacket, as it will get cold, even in mid summer. You will be hit with eruptions of ash, and the hydrogen sulphide fumes do some interesting things to your sinuses. A pair of safety goggles and filter mask purchased from the hardware store (in Australia) may look silly, but by the end of the night everyone else will be envious. If nothing else bring a bandana, packets of tissues and Visine or eyewash. Trust me on this.

You can almost guarantee that conditions will change throughout the night, particularly if it rains and the steam whips around all the time, so you may need to shift vantage points several times. Now, from this moment on, it's seat of your pants photography. Sure, you can click away on automatic and you'll get some nice spiky red lava blotches amidst lots of grey smoke. You may even get some lava lake shots as in *image 4*, which was shot on automatic using a digital Olympus. But if you want to achieve something more spectacular, you need to employ several tricks.

Firstly, get the feel for the approximate timing of each eruption, and watch it through your viewfinder to see how high the lava is shooting, then adjust your composition accordingly. When you're ready to start shooting, depress the shutter the moment you see lava spurting out of the vent. If you want an image of lava shooting straight up, release the shutter the moment the lava reaches the apex of its eruption, so you freeze the image at that point. If you want the lava to appear curling over the top into a fountain effect, keep the shutter open until most of the lava hits the sides of the vent. In *image 5*, I closed the shutter before the lava had finished falling; hence the red trails appear 'cut-off'.

I can't impress this enough. There is no set time to leaving the shutter open; it really is up to what you prefer visually, and the degree of activity. To avoid overexposing that part of the image focused on the centre of the vent where lava is sloshing around, I generally use 100ASA film, with an aperture of 5.6. Because eruptions come in bursts, followed by long, smelly, ash-filled periods of inactivity, you can find yourself in a situation where the aperture is open, endlessly waiting. If you're shooting film, you'll waste stacks. If you're using memory cards, you won't have time to delete dud shots unless the volcano is very quiet, otherwise you'll miss what could be the only decent opportunity of the evening. So, if you open the shutter and the eruption is a dud, cup your hand over the lens. Don't touch the lens; your hand is simply to reduce the ambient light before the next eruption. This is especially useful for a very long time lapse, say, when three vents are operating one behind the other, but not simultaneously, as in *images 6* and *7*. In both cases the shutter was open for something like seven or eight minutes, but in *image 7*, I held my hand in front of the lens between eruptions.

Why not a multiple exposure? Because that entails touching the camera, and things are generally happening too fast.

You cannot be blithely standing with your eye fixed to the viewfinder. For one thing, if the shutter is still open you won't be able to see a thing. More importantly, you need to pay attention to what's happening around you. You're standing on the edge of a real, live, volcano, with real, live, spurting molten lava. Additionally, there is so much ground movement going on that the last thing you want is the slightest bump on the tripod. In *images 5* and *6* you can see the ground shudder that occurred before the lava began erupting. I admit, it's an offbeat (okay, bizarre) technique, but the hand-over-the-lens technique works for me. As I said, it's real seat of your pants stuff, and ultimately, a matter of personal taste what effect you prefer.

The rim is often choked with steam and billowing ash clouds, and the degree of activity of individual vents changes from week to week, so there's no one 'right' place to stand, except within the parameters set by the guides. Yasur is a remarkably safe volcano, but it can be deadly if you go wandering off into dangerous locations.

Most night tours won't stay as long as photographers would prefer. For guaranteed unlimited time, you'll have to pay extra for a separate vehicle and guide to wait until you finish — again, you'll need to organise this in advance and conform when you're down there. This is very doable, however it will cost you extra, although not a huge amount compared to the expense of getting there. You might be lucky enough to get all your shots during a standard tour, but if you're like me, you'll find being up on the vent both frustrating and addictive. Hence why it's best to stay on Tanna additional nights. Also bear in mind that conveniences like toilets are non-existent.

Once back at the hotel, a hot shower and a gallon of shampoo will feel like your first priority. Mine is always a bottle of cleaning fluid — for the camera and lenses. They'll be *caked* in highly acidic ash and grit. So give them the full treatment before you shower. Remember, the electricity may not be available all night, and you can still shower in the dark.

In my opinion, other than the lava in the vents, there really is only one good time to photograph Yasur, and that's sunrise. There's less cloud and wind, so the erupting steam remains cohesive and hangs around the vent longer. Less ambient light and thicker steam clouds also reflect the glow from the lava better than during the day. And then there are all those amazing sunrise colours.

Getting there before dawn takes some planning — scouting the terrain the day before is vital, even if you ended up with very few shots at that time. To achieve these dawn shots, you'll need reliable transport because you must *arrive* on the north side of Lake Siwi around first light. You won't have more than fifteen to twenty minutes of ideal light and wind-free conditions, so forget the coffee and don your running shoes, because you may find that the location you thought was perfect isn't working out, and then you're racing the clock. For *images 8, 9, 10 and 11*, I used two Nikons, one set on manual, both with 20mm lenses, no tripod, no additional lenses or filters, no flash, and took four rolls of film in fifteen minutes, bracketing up to four stops either side of what the light meter was telling me was ideal. National Geographic subsequently featured *image 11*, while *image 8* is currently(?) used on one of Vanuatu's postage stamps.

If you really only have the time or budget to do one tour, opt for the night trip to Yasur. And if you are using only a simple digital camera, my best advice is to purchase a small tripod. When you find a good location on the vent, frame the erupting lava to the best of your lens' ability, and set it on automatic aperture *not* shutter, and wait until the lava is well and truly erupting before depressing the shutter. Turn the flash off, it's wasting power — unless you want to photograph people on the edge of the vent, as in *image 3*, a time-delayed fill-in flash (digital) self-portrait. These days, a good digital camera can deal with up to 30 seconds exposure on automatic, so you should get some excellent lava sprays, as in *image 6*. However, this is only possible with a tripod.

Finally, a word of caution. There are no guardrails on Yasur, and no guarantees that you won't return with anything more than images of fuzzy grey ash and steam. Don't ignore the guides and venture somewhere dangerous, no matter how much you want the photo. If you have an unimpeded view of spurting lava, the lava has unimpeded access to you. Yasur is not a controlled theme park ride, but nature at its most awesome. If you're patient and sensible, it's an unforgettable experience and you'll return with truly memorable photographs.

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