



A person wearing a blue helmet and a backpack is seen from behind, looking out over a volcanic landscape. In the distance, a volcano is erupting, with a bright plume of ash and smoke rising into the sky. The scene is set against a backdrop of dark, rocky terrain and a hazy sky. The overall atmosphere is one of awe and adventure.

KAT'S HOT PEAK ADVENTURE

*Katrina Megget escapes
the commuter treadmill
with a grand tour of
Volcanoes*

The creaking boom rumbled around us like an amplified chair leg scrapping along a tile floor. I felt the vibrations up my legs as the volcano shook, the heat on my body, and saw the hiccup of cloud mushroom puff up and away. Exhilaration danced in my bloodstream as I waited for the big one; the giant burp that would send devil-red lava spurting into the air.

Standing on a ridge above the volcanic crater of Stromboli in Italy's Aeolian Islands, eagerly waiting in the dark for the fireworks show, I registered how different this moment was to my week-night entertainment of yesteryear. For it wasn't every day I found myself standing on the side of a fire-breathing mountain.

In fact, less than two years prior, my school-night entertainment mostly consisted of being the last to leave the office sometime around 7pm, before spending a barely bearable 90 minutes on a grimy commuter train to the depths of South London. Then, a frantic dinner-making escapade and bed, only to repeat the process the very next day. Life felt like a smudge of grey with sunsets enjoyed from behind office or train windows.

I realised I needed a challenge; a quest; something to get my teeth into, that pushed me outside my comfort zone. Which was how I found myself at the top of Stromboli in the dark, breathing in ash and willing the volcano to spit out its molten refuse.

Kat's Hot Peak Adventure – that's what I'd originally called it; a five and a half-year quest to climb 40 volcanoes by the age of 40. It was a derring-do adventure, a physical and mental challenge in exotic locations dotted around the globe.

The ash-puffing Stromboli was volcano number five – a year after I started the quest.

Emerging from the sea north of Sicily, this was the so called 'Lighthouse of the Mediterranean' and the absolute definition of a volcano; coned shaped and proud, belching black soot and dramatically erupting almost on queue with a fiery display of red-hot liquid rock. Sadly, we failed to witness a lavish lava dance – the wind and ash cloud were not our friends that night – but the hike itself to the 924m-high summit, together with the rumbles and waves of throbbing heat, the red glow of the ash cloud, and the night-time experience left no doubt that this was where I needed to be.

The grand challenge had begun with Mt Vesuvius, the infamous volcano known for the devastating eruption in AD79 that buried the Italian town of Pompeii and its inhabitants. Now Vesuvius was a sleeping giant on Naples' doorstep. Quiet, yet imposing – and also a tourist attraction. Tour buses regularly made the journey up to the carpark, which sits a mere 150m below the 1,281m-high summit.

I'd taken the easy option and got the bus. I felt like I was cheating, but the steep 900m trail to the crater had me puffing like a smoking volcano so I reasoned I shouldn't be so hard on myself. At the top, Naples stretched out to my right, with Sorrento in the distance to my left. In front was a shimmery blue ocean that melted into the sky. Behind me though, was the real deal – a giant rusty-red pit, steam issuing from fumaroles, and the base was a funnel of sandy volcanic scree, an hour glass whose time was almost up.

Volcano number two didn't have these views – in fact, volcano number two had no views at all. My research had drawn me to the little coin-shaped island of Nevis in the Caribbean, the smaller island of the former British colony St Kitts and Nevis. Plonked in the middle of Nevis



was Nevis Peak, a 985m-high volcano, thickly covered in lush tropical vegetation with its summit in the clouds. The trek to the top was described as scrambly and treacherous. It sounded perfect.

We clawed our way up the slope on a mud track, over rocks and branches using the tree roots as ladders. In the steeper sections, some kind soul had haphazardly tied together handtowels as a makeshift rope. The material was sodden and slippery, drenched in brown goeey mud. By the time I reached the cloud-cocooned summit, I too was smeared in mud from top to toe, damp brown patches on my clothes and muck under my fingernails. It was a lot of dirty effort for no views at all.

I was now two volcanoes and a year in, but I didn't feel like I was winning. In the beginning I had made an epic list of all the 40 volcanoes I would like to tick off. They were extravagant and exotic. Some

were in hard-to-reach corners of the globe, others had bathed fire, while others were covered with snow. After getting number one ticked, I hit a brick wall of no-doubt. My nicely drawn-up list now seemed scary, full of *what ifs*.

I decided to scrap the original list and choose flexibility instead. A one-week tour of Sicily and the Aeolian Islands would give me four volcanoes, two of which had not been on the original list but which I gratefully accepted – along with Stromboli and Mt Etna, I'd have the pleasure of climbing the incredibly hot and barren Gran Cratere on Vulcano and the green verdant slopes of Fossa delle Felci on Salina.


With my quest back on track, failure struck. It was in New Zealand on a month-long trip back to the motherland. Three volcanoes were in my sights, but the weather had other ideas. High winds and poor visibility put paid to a climb of Mt Ngauruhoe, while a great monsoon with

torrential rain destroyed the dream of reaching Mt Taranaki's summit. Only Rangitoto Island, famous as the picture-postcard backdrop to Auckland city, made the New Zealand volcano-climbing cut.

To make up the shortfall, I dug around in geology books closer to home. England's tallest mountain is Scafell Pike - the remains of an ancient volcanic island arc where two tectonic plates explosively met some 450 million years ago - and this became volcano number eight, while a two-day walk across the boggy Cheviot Hills, created by the smashing together of Scotland and England 350-400 million years ago, made number nine.

A two-week tour of El Salvador, taking in eight volcanoes, should have been next, but when no one else booked, the trip fell through. I turned my attention instead to Europe's largest stratovolcano, France's Auvergne region; a picturesque enclave of green meadows filled with wildflowers surrounded by rolling volcanic peaks painted hues of green. I aimed to climb four peaks, it looked like I'd only achieve two, but came away with five.

Now the Azores look promising, and in November I start the 3,000km trek along New Zealand's Te Araroa trail, from North to South, taking in what I hope will be another five volcanoes.

The quest itself has been harder than I expected - and not for the obvious physical reasons. The mental mountains I've had to climb along the way have pushed me to the brink and back. Yet despite the fear of failure, I've learnt about the virtue of patience, of flexibility, of taking baby steps and ultimately not giving up. Self-doubt is all in the mind; we have the potential to push beyond it. But more than anything the quest has shone a light on what I'm capable of. And besides, all the strife - and of course the adventure - certainly beats a packed commuter train any day. 

5 LAVA FILLED ADVENTURES

SICILY AND THE AEOLIAN ISLANDS GRAN CRATERE ON VULCANO, FOSSA DELLE FELCI ON SALINA, STROMBOLI AND MT ETNA

How to get there: Fly to Catania in Sicily. For the Aeolian Islands, get public transport to

Milazzo where you can start your island-hopping adventure. For Mt Etna, have Hotel/Rifugio Sapienza (www.rifugiosapienza.com/) as your base (accessible by public transport from Catania). You can either start the hike from here or use the cable car to get partway up.

Difficulty: Moderate to challenging - expect several hours of walking for each volcano. Steep, very hot during summer, high altitude effects on Etna.

Kit: Sturdy boots, lots of water. Helmets and paper face masks required on Stromboli and Etna - these will be provided by your guide. Glasses also recommended to keep grit out of your eyes.

Info: Gran Cratere and Fossa delle Felci can both be climbed without a guide. A guide is needed for Stromboli and Etna. Because of the logistics for Stromboli and Etna, the author decided to take the hassle out and book a week's tour with KE Adventure, which also included Gran Cratere and Fossa delle Felci (www.keadventure.com/holidays/italy-walking-sicily-etna-stromboli-taormina).



AUVERGNE REGION, FRANCE

How to get there: From Paris take a train to Murat or Le Lioran (about 5 hours) - you'll have to change trains at Clermont-Ferrand.

Difficulty: Moderate to challenging

Kit: a French phrase book - virtually no English is spoken

Info: Wild camping (bivouacking) is allowed although it's possible to walk between villages each day along the GR400 route (which is very well signposted) or base yourself in Le Lioran and do different day walks from there. The GR400 guidebook is in French www.livre.fnac.com/a10297116/Collectif-TopoGuides-Volcan-du-Cantal-Pays-de-Saint-Flour-et-de-Ruynes-en-Margeride but Cicerone has published this www.cicerone.co.uk/walking-in-the-auvergne.

Tourist info: www.auvergne-tourism.com/massif-cantalien/le-lioran-372-2.html

**MT VESUVIUS (1,281M)
OUTSIDE NAPLES, ITALY**

How to get there: Fly to Naples. Join a day tour from Naples or Pompeii (a train ride from Naples), where the bus will take you to the summit carpark.
Difficulty: Moderate – it's a short walk to the crater but steep.
Kit: None required
Info: Many day tours also include ticket deals for entering the buried towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Details can be found here: www.rometoolkit.com/whattodo/pompeii-vesuvius_bus.html



**SCAFELL PIKE (978M),
LAKE DISTRICT,
ENGLAND**

How to get there: Easiest by car
Difficulty: Moderate to challenging. Poor weather conditions likely.
Kit: Map, compass and waterproofs recommended
Info: Scafell Pike should not be underestimated, make sure you're prepared (OS Explorer map OL6 www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/shop/explorer-map-the-lake-district-south-western-area.html) Other in-depth info can be found here: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wasdale/features/enjoying-englands-highest-mountain---scafell-pike-in-wasdale and here: www.scafellpike.org.uk/



**NEVIS PEAK (985M),
NEVIS, ST
KITTS & NEVIS,
CARIBBEAN**

How to get there: Fly to St Kitts and jump on a 45-minute ferry to Nevis. Taxis will take you to the start point and you can organise for the same taxi to pick you up 3-5 hours later.
Difficulty: Moderate – some challenging sections requiring scrambling skills. Very muddy.
Kit: Be prepared to get very muddy so wear old clothes. If you organise a return taxi they will likely provide a towel for you to sit on back to the hotel.
Info: Recommended that you climb Nevis Peak on a tour because there are multiple tracks and it can be easy to get lost. The author used Sunrise Tours (www.nevisnaturetours.com) and stayed at Oualie Beach Resort (www.oualiebeach.com/). British Airways provide flight and hotel package deals.

**QUESTIONS TO
HELP YOU PLAN:**

- Can the volcano be climbed independently or is a guide needed?
- Is a permit required to climb? How is this organised?
- How accessible is the trail head to the summit? What transport/planning might be required?
- What is the best time of year (and time of day) to climb?
- How difficult is the climb? What fitness/skills prep is required? Does altitude need to be factored in? Any specialist kit required?
- What security/safety/medical considerations are there?
- Is a tourist visa required?
- Is climbing a volcano covered by your travel insurance?