

STEP BACK IN TIME

Linda Carr travels to Colac to learn about our local volcanoes

Source: Museums Victoria / Photographer: Frank Cotta

There was a time when Australians thought of themselves as being of the New World – the poor cousins to the grand old cultures of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. However with scientific advances we are coming to know that geologically – and in terms of human civilisation – we are actually of the Old World. We are of both the New World and the Old World.

Red Rock Lookout, just outside of Colac, is a place that throws up this understanding with some drama. The vista spreading westward before you is vaguely familiar and weirdly strange yet at the same time.

Is it a moonscape? Middle Earth? Here you stare into extremely steep, almost treeless, embankments – vents of an erupted volcano pockmark the entire area.

Dr Julie Boyce from the Volcano Discovery Centre (Penshurst) explains.

“We call this area in Victoria the New Volcanics Province. Stretching from Melbourne to Mt Gambier in SA, it’s composed of 437 volcanoes. Most of

the volcanoes erupted between 5000 and 8 million years ago. There are other volcanism sites in Australia related to mantle plumes, – like Hawaii – but we know these are different from what we see in Victoria because it’s very different chemically and so we have to say there’s something else going on in Victoria. We’re moving north as a tectonic plate at seven centimetres a year and that’s really, really fast. We’re actually one of the fastest moving tectonic plates in the world.”

Scientists refer to the craters in this area as maar, a German word. It is a linguistic quirk that the name of the area’s First Peoples’ collective is also maar, meaning ‘the people’ and considering the duration of continual volcanic activity, it is highly probable that the Maar people would have witnessed eruptions. Some very early Europeans recounted indigenous stories of hills spewing forth smoke and steam. Indigenous creation stories with volcanic themes are known about Mt Elephant (Derrinallum), Mt Buninyong (Ballarat) and Budj Bim (Macarthur).

Photograph by Dr. Julie Boyce/Monash University



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Over at the second peak of the Red Rock Lookout the volcanic panorama continues, however here your gaze is repeatedly drawn to the sprawling structure at the bottom of the rise. Not only is this 37-room homestead architecturally interesting, its position so close to the volcanic Lookout speaks of other connections. It’s as if this very spot marks the encounter of the ancient land with its recent European history.

Gary and Sharyn Gibson, current owners and operators of the homestead, Coragulac House, have been fortunate to live in this captivating landscape for the past 12 years. Crater lakes are a prominent part of their surroundings as they explain.

“This whole area was dotted with crater lakes. There was 25 of them at one stage. All the craters you can see from Red Rock hill had water in them but over time, through drought and irrigation, they’ve dried out. Even the lake on our own property only filled up two years ago. It was dry when we came here.”

“It’s extraordinary. In this area you can have a lake on one side of the street that is fresh water and a lake on the other side of the road that is salt. The district even has its own pink lake – Lake Weering. It’s only pink at certain times, usually in summer.”





The Volcanic Province and the Red Rock Lookout have been drawing scientists from all over the world, some even to Coragulac House.

"One of our accommodation cottages was built in the 1950s by Monash University as a field station for both local and international scientists to study the volcanic area. It's renovated now but when we came it was like a time capsule. Those scientific visits continued well into the 2000s. We have even had a few of those scientists come back recently to stay."

What continues the volcanologists' interest? Is a future event anticipated?

Dr Julie responds by giving the example of a recent eruption event in Mexico. A flat land farmer was surprised to see a fissure amongst his crops and within a couple of weeks it developed into a volcanic eruption.

"That eruption was preceded by a swarm of small earthquakes. And we would feel that here straight away because we've got seismometers all over Australia. As soon as we saw swarms we would



Photograph by Dr. Julie Boyce/Monash University

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know that's not normal behaviour for Victoria and it would probably be the volcanoes. The province as a whole is active. We could get a new volcano form but each current volcano is not dormant because it will never erupt again."

"Australia is a very big, old continent. It was made of all these little micro-continents that smashed together over time. Because of this, the crust under our feet isn't uniform in thickness – it thins in steps. In Western Victoria the depth to the earth's mantle is about 50 to 60 kilometres. That sounds like a lot but it's

actually some of the thinnest crust on the planet. It's very, very thin. So magma doesn't have a massive amount of depth to get through before it has to erupt."

Red Rock is part of a living cultural landscape and future panoramas from the Lookout may contain other exciting elements. Maybe even smoke on the water of the crater lakes. Only time will tell. Red Rock Lookout is open to all visitors in the township of Alvie. For further information regarding Coragulac House visit www.coragulachouse.com

