



Erta Ale Volcano

Hard travel, easy walk, rewarding destination

by Walter Schenk

The hardest thing is to get to the trailhead of the walk to Erta Ale volcano.

1. You have to travel to Ethiopia
2. You have to rent two expensive 4WD cars in reasonable condition driven by experienced drivers. You do need two for safety. The landscape is very deserted.
3. You have to stand some adversities like
 - bumpy roads.
 - becoming permanently dusty.
 - sitting in the car for at least four days.
 - bearing temperatures up to 45°C.
 - having less than basic or no accommodation.
 - being ripped off consequently by inhospitable people.

Well, we felt able to stand all that. We were already in Addis Ababa and had done all the negotiations and arrangements to get the two cross-country Landcruisers. That they each lacked at least one wheel nut did not mean they were not suitable for our undertaking. We had to decide in which car we wanted to sit. The red one got the acceptance. It was less comfortable, less clean, the driver's English was poorer, that was true, but still we were able to crank the side windows down and up again which was important for occasionally taking photos and protection against the cold draught or hot dust.



Sulphuric Acid Lake near Dallol

It took us two days to get to the northern city of Mekele. It was another day descending to the Danakil depression to the locality of Dallol, a surreal place presenting a bluish and greenish volcanic lake of sulphuric acid 120m below sea level. Another five hours brought us through stone and sand desert to the extremely bumpy foothills of Erta Ale.

On the way we had to pass several controls and had to fork out high fees for passing the area and to pay for armed soldiers, policemen and guides for our safety as well as for their full board. They even raised a charge for cleaning which very obviously has not taken place at all.

We reached the parking at the trailhead at about noon. There is a volcano to the south which we considered 'ours'. We were ready for the 10km climb and 420m ascent to the crater. However, we found out that the obligatory armed soldiers and the guides were not ready to go. It was not earlier than 4pm when they showed their readiness after an extended religious prayer meeting.

Fortunately the temperature was far below 30°C. It made our venture much easier. Carrying a tent, sleeping bag, lots of water and some tucker I tried my best to get to the summit before sunset. For Ingrid and Franz this was not important. That is why I rushed ahead. I wanted to see the lava lake and take photos still at daylight. As it turned out on the way our first guess was wrong. Erta Ale is another very inconspicuous hill to the east.

First I crossed a sandy plain area together with my guide named Hussein. Walking here was a bit arduous. After that we came to a field bordered to the right by a lava wall. It looks like remnants of an eruption of the volcano to the south. Eventually the path becomes ascending. We had to walk over solidified lava which was quite easy. For a real bushwalker that was unusual because there is almost no vegetation around. Thus the hike is conceived a bit monotonous.

Usually the way is the goal. However, for me that did not apply here. For me the goal is the goal. Occasionally some 'hornitos' (a few metres high little lava vents not puffing anymore) came into sight.



Hornitos (little Lava Vents)

Getting closer to the hill the path steepens resulting in a slower walking pace. The sun is already behind me just about to say good night. Finally I am standing on a rim in front of a sheer cliff. I am impressed by a stunning view over a huge lava field. Contrary to my expectations it is neither hot nor liquid at all. However, I can make out a somewhat reddish gleam in about 250m distance and the silhouettes of some people standing around. Impatiently I am dropping my backpack and getting ready to crawl the difficult and steep path down the crevice on all fours.

Continuing on that lava field is scary. It is just a thin crust of solidified so called Pahoehoe lava over some blank volume. This surface turns out as brittle as krupuk, a bit less tasty though. One has to step over it very cautiously otherwise you could unexpectedly break through (accompanied by a cracking sound like biting into krupuk) and find yourself a fair bit deeper. Fortunately that is in general not more than 50cm.

From the distance I could already occasionally hear voices yelling 'Ah' and 'Oh' and even clapping hands. Finally after carefully moving to the inner rim I could see and hear what is raising the cheer; a gap 15m deep and about 30m wide opens.



Ah's and Oh's

Down there I can see white-hot stripes in a darker glowing surface. The hot lava becomes boiling in one part of the scenery. It seems as if a giant force is stirring it vigorously. At the same time I can feel a nearly unbearable heat wave approaching.

Together with the wind and a really strong stench of sulphur dioxide it becomes hard to take photos at the same time. From time to time I can watch such boiling eruptions here and there throwing glowing lava spatters high up into the air. I indulged very much in this spectacle I have longed for since I got to know about the existence of Erta Ale.



Boiling Lava in the Hellhole

It was an even more scary thing to return to my luggage in the total dark! Several times I cracked through the brittle layer finding one foot half a metre deeper. I pitched the tent on that outer rim. Due to the strong wind this was not very easy to manage. Securing it with some of the many lava rocks around I finally made it.



At Hephaestus' Forge

Meanwhile Ingrid and Franz arrived and we had another go together to the impressive site, accompanied by the guide again. The night was not really comfortable in our two berth tent occupied by the three of us. I awoke far before dawn. Thank goodness I managed to sneak out and to the crater unseen by any guide being able to make it again in the pitch dark. Prudently I tied a cloth tightly around my nose. It gave an effective protection against the gases which became quite annoying depending on the wind direction.



Glowing Hellhole at dawn

Now I had Erta Ale for myself only. I was alone with the volcano. I was able to circumvent the whole glowing and bubbling hellhole unimpeded by anybody. I could witness most impressive activities of old blacksmith Hephaestus. For me that was by far the highlight of the whole enterprise and of the trip to Ethiopia. I could move around wherever I wished and take photos and videos of those striking eruptions.



Treacherous Pahoehoe lava

Even a neighbouring hill was conquered to grant me a bird's eye view. Eventually it dawned and other tourists approached the crater to catch a last brief glimpse of this striking spectacle. I was also futilely searching for a Geocache hidden in the area when Hussein impatiently called me back.

When I returned to the camp site the tent and everything was already packed. I only had to take the rucksack. After a last glimpse back over the treacherous Pahoehoe field I followed Ingrid and Franz down the 10km to the parking. The weather was so unusual that it even began to drizzle. By all means Erta Ale is a destination which is a must for everybody eagerly interested in active volcanoes. I would like to visit the place again if it were easier, cheaper and less nasty to get there.

Articles for Newsletter

Am looking for articles for Newsletter. Many thanks for those who have supplied articles.

If you have anything please send to travistt@tpg.com.au

The Annual General Meeting is to be held on Saturday 3rd September, at a still to be determined venue.

If you wish to nominate for a position

Any two members of the Association shall be at liberty to nominate any other member to serve as an officer or other member of the Management Committee.

The nomination, which shall be in writing and signed by the member and his proposer and seconder, shall be lodged with the secretary at least fourteen days before the annual general meeting at which the election is to take place.

Should, at the commencement of such meeting, any previously accepted nomination be withdrawn, further nominations for that position may be taken from the floor of the meeting.

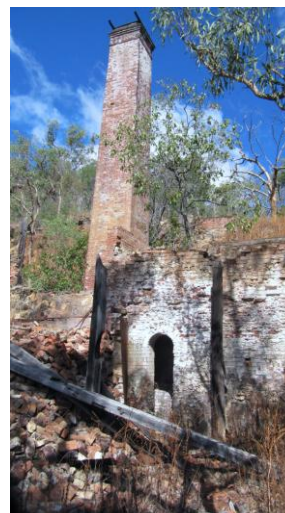
Please Add to Your Walks List

August 24 – Wednesday - Collins Weir to Rocky Bluff Battery

Depart at 8:00am from Tolga PO or be at Collins Weir (near the wall) at 8:30am. This is a moderate walk with minimal ups and downs. It is graded as moderate because of the 5 kms of rock hopping and sand walking along the Walsh River between Collins Weir and Rocky Bluff battery. For some of the 5 km return journey we will follow a road. Once at the battery you can choose to frolic in the weir, explore the battery (known as 'Shaking Moses') and climb the hill to the end of the Stannary Hills Tramway, or come with me up a side creek to Butterfly Gorge. Bring gaiters or sock savers for sand and weed protection and Atherton 1:50k map. **Contact John Dwyer 0428 604 169** or john.dwyer@live.com.au

For a brief history of the area visit this website:

<http://www.epa.qld.gov.au/chims/placeDetail.html?siteId=19477>



Rocky Bluff Battery



You may get to see thousands of these in Butterfly Gorge.

What Orchid is That



Keeled Greenhood
Crangonorchis depauperata
(formerly *Plerostylis depauperata*)

A terrestrial orchid with underground tubers. It has short, ground hugging leaves anywhere from three to seven.

The single flower rises from the centre of the rosette of leaves on a thin stem. It is white with lime green colouring forming a hood. The flowering period is March to August.

It occurs in open forests, woodlands and rainforest margins on sheltered slopes. It is found growing in amongst grass and shrubs in well-drained sandy or gravelly soil. The plants are deciduous and survive as tubers for the drier part of the year. They re-emerge with summer rains, flowering throughout autumn and into winter. The flowers are pollinated by small gnats. It reproduces by seed and spreads clonally through the production of daughter tubers at the ends of roots.



**Black Orchid, Channelled Boat-Lip Orchid,
Tiger Boat-Lip Orchid**
Cymbidium canaliculatum

This hardy species grows across northern Australia, most parts of Queensland and northern New South Wales. It is an epiphyte of the open forests and grows high up in ironbark and other eucalypts well above reach of fires. They grow in dense clumps of pseudo bulbs.

It grows in the hollows of dead limbs where the roots penetrate long distances into the cool, moist, decomposing wood. Here they are protected from the harsh, dry conditions.

Plants flower profusely and the flowers are fragrant and extremely variable in flower colour and floral patterns. The colours can range from pale green, brown, purple, dull red, to dark reddish black and are often blotched or striped and in various combinations. They flower from September to October.





Botanical name: *Hollandaea sayeriana*
Common Name: Sayer's Oak

Sayer's Oak is an inconspicuous small tree or large shrub usually less than 10m high. It is confined to the Wet Tropics where it occurs between about Mt Bellenden Ker and the South Johnstone River from sea-level to 800m. It is only found in the wettest rainforest on a variety of rock types, but appears to be more common on basalt and granite.

Sayer's Oak is best seen in the Topaz area or around Harvey Creek on the coast. It is rarely common in an area, usually occurring as a plant here and there.

Features: Leaves are large and fat with a very short and swollen stalk. Leaf margin is usually slightly toothed. Impressive shows of long and pendulous pinkish flowers resembling that of Grevillea occur well back from the newest leaves. They have a sweet scent. Large green boat-shaped fruit contain up to 20 white angular seeds. You will be tested on this plant on my next walk....so brush up and impress me!!!



Botanical name: *Cassia brewsteri*
Common Name: Leichhardt Bean

Leichhardt Bean is a handsome small tree or large bushy shrub usually less than 8m high, although in the deep south it is a forest giant. In the tropics it occurs from about Valley of Lagoons southwards in savanna habitats and rocky areas of vine thicket which are sheltered from fire.

Leichhardt Bean is fairly common in the 'Jervoise'-'Conjuboy' area south of Mt Garnet.

Features: Leaves are compound, and bluish or very pale on the underside. In the dry season trees are nearly leafless. Flower colour is variable, with the red flowered form far superior to the yellow form. Long tassels appear quickly after the first storms, with flushing leaves emerging at the same time. Long bean-like pods to 35cm long can persist on trees for many months. The pod is woody and bluish at first. Numerous small hard yellowish seeds are packed cross ways within a leathery packet.



Beetles seen in Butterfly Gorge



Who's got new shoes?