

The Visitrors

Di Tom Gidwitz

Vesuvius was active through much of the nineteenth century, and although its repose periods were longer, its violence less continuous, it was nonetheless deadly: in 1872 an avalanche of hot rock killed twenty five tourists. But there were plenty more to replace them as leisure travel became increasing accessible to the growing middle class. In Britain, Cook's Tours began selling package trips to Italy, promising Vesuvius climbs.



Over the centuries countless volcanophiles had cut a well-worn path to the mountaintop, yet the journey was far from pleasant. Porters, beggars, vendors, guides-for-hire and wandering musicians besieged the tourists on their way up, offering to tote them to the top in litters, pull them uphill with straps, or hoist them to the summit in sedan chairs.

Mark Twain visited in 1868. He left his hotel by mule in the predawn darkness, winding through vineyards, past gardens and cottages and was halfway up the mountain by sunrise. He described his trip in *Innocents Abroad*:

"It was a rough, narrow trail, and led over an old lava flow -- a black ocean which was tumbled into a thousand fantastic shapes -- a wild chaos of ruin, desolation, and barrenness - a wilderness of billowy upheavals, of furious whirlpools, of miniature mountains rent asunder - of gnarled and knotted, wrinkled and twisted masses of blackness that mimicked branching roots, great vines, trunks of trees, all interlaced and mingled together: and all these weird shapes, all this turbulent panorama, all this stormy, far-stretching waste of blackness, with its thrilling suggestiveness of life, of action, of boiling, surging, furious motion, was petrified! - all stricken dead and cold in the instant of its maddest rioting! - fettered, paralyzed, and left to glower at heaven in impotent rage for evermore!"



At twenty to six in the morning Twain and his party were climbing a slope of loose stones toward the crater, stepping forward and sliding back on a surface that seemed steep as a wall. An hour and fifteen minutes later they stood at the summit, contemplating the crater below them. It was then two hundred feet deep, four to five hundred feet wide, and in the center, rising from the crater floor like an island surrounded by a ditch, was a beautiful hundred foot



high jumble of frozen lava. "The sulphur coating of that island was gaudy in the extreme - all mingled together in the richest confusion were red, blue, brown, black, yellow, white - I do not know that there was a color, or shade of a color, or combination of colors, unrepresented -- and when the sun burst through the morning

mists and fired this tinted magnificence, it topped imperial Vesuvius like a jeweled crown!"

In 1878, Hungarian engineer Ernesto Obleicht proposed a railway to carry tourists the last half mile from the end of the government road, to the top. It opened in 1880, a 900-yard long funicular whose two fifteen-passenger cable cars, the "Etna" and "Vesuvio" climbed 1,300 feet, carrying up to 300 tourists a day on the twelve minute trip to the upper station near the summit. Although worried locals feared it might goad the sensitive mountain into erupting, it opened to much fanfare and inspired songwriters Luigi Denza and Peppino Turco to dash off, "Funicular, Funiculi" the famous, jaunty tune that swept the world and became a standard.

But the venture was on shaky financial ground: coal for the steam engine that powered the system had to be hauled up by horseback; passengers were scarce in bad weather and throughout the winter, and an annual concession fee and tax on every passenger, paid to win agreement for the project from the local township of Resina and the volcano guides, sucked away the profits. After Obleicht sold out to a French firm at a handsome markup, the venture, swamped in debt, went bust.

The collapse brought Cook's Tours face to face with disaster. The company was under contract for scads of volcano tours. John Mason Cook, the son of the company's founder, propped up the funicular company with his own funds, then, in 1887, bought the railway outright. To keep it alive he refused to pay concession fees to Resina or taxes to the guides.

The guides promptly rioted. They set the lower station afire, cut the funicular's cables, and pushed a cable car a half a mile uphill and dumped it into the crater. When Cook rebuilt, the guides cut the cable again. Cook then shut the whole operation down; the guides yielded and agreed to a fixed fee's on Cook's terms. Peace was restored, and the travelers returned.

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Cook now had a near-monopoly over access to the Vesuvian summit. Anyone was perfectly free to ride by carriage for an hour and a half up the government road from Herculaneum, but the last 1.75 mile stretch to the lower funicular station was closed to all but those who had bought one of Cook's packages, which included round-trip carriage rides to the mountain, and escorts to the crater rim for a three-hour stay. Those dreading the steep fifteen minute climb to the crater could pay more for two porters to carry them, and an extra fee secured a guided hike to flowing lava, where visitors could press coins into the lava to make souvenirs, and use red hot rocks to cook eggs and ignite cigars.

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