

Some White Island whys

I went to White Island once. As everyone is now saying, it's a hell on earth, even when it's behaving itself.

The zip on a jacket I wore all those 35 years ago was corroded instantly and jammed for the rest of its useful life, such was the level of sulphur in the air. Can't have been great for the lungs, either.

My brief tramp through a desolate moonscape of sulphuric acid streams and steaming holes was with a couple of New Plymouth friends, one of whom owned a small jet boat that got us out there. Just.

He seemed impervious to danger in those days and happily tramped to the edge of the crater lake where the steam was thickest. I wouldn't go near it.

The expedition began badly. He launched his boat into the river at Whakatane and jumped aboard. But attempts to start the motor were fruitless and he began drifting downstream, saved from an ignominious end by his chucking a line ashore to one of us running down the river bank.

The trip was postponed a day while he got someone to check. Next morning was beautifully fine and we were off, down the river to the sea, across the bar...and under a sudden rogue wave that swept the sunglasses off my face.

After we baled the boat out, my friend assured us we were fine and so we put to sea on the 49km journey to do what anyone seemed to be able to do who dared – tramp around the cone of a live volcano, whose previous recent eruption was firmly in my mind from a photo showing a big cloud of steam rising to great heights.

At first, the trip was easy. The sea was dead flat (goodness only knows where that early wave came from) and the boat skipped across it like a skimming flat stone.

Then we noticed a change. Beyond the lee of the land there was a huge following wind, which was doing what such blows do, gathering up the sea surface into bigger and bigger swells.

Within minutes we were teetering at the top of crests, plunging into troughs. There was another boat going the same way and at times we seemed to hover 10 metres above them. I took illogical comfort from an accompanying school of dolphins.

At that point I knew if the motor failed we were dead. I knew about small jet boats because Dad had one. They weren't made for long sea voyages. They seemed invincible when their engines pushed you along at 30 knots, but they wallowed around like any other dinghy if it stopped, like yesterday.

However, nothing like that happened. We made the island and somehow got ashore to peer at ruined sulphur mining buildings caught in a disastrous event early last century. Men died when a lahar swept out of the crater.

Would it happen to us? We had no idea. We were doing what young men do, getting a thrill from risk of unknown dimensions.

Which is why I sat watching TV's dramatic coverage of the latest tragedy and wondered why it could possibly happen now. What were they doing out there?

My horror grew when I read that 10,000 people a year take the same risks as those we ignored back in the 1970s, when far less was known about the island, although the dangers seemed as plain as day to me.

Our official volcanologists have rapidly distanced themselves from blame by saying they issued the standard alerts as they saw them. A day after the tragedy, GeoNet declared it was up to the tour operators to take action on any warnings they gave out in good faith.

The previous White Island event was in 2016. Have people got blasé? The tours are obviously important to Whakatane as a source of income, so how much did that bend people's judgements about going to such a hostile place?

It's easy being wise now, of course. And probably inappropriate. But it was surely the first thing that crept into our minds as we absorbed the news of this terrible event.

My mind went further than that, naturally. I was back on that day when three young men took the same risk and survived with nothing more than vivid memories and instantly corroded jacket fittings.

There was no money involved, mind. Just our own willingness to chance it beyond sensible reasoning.