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A20

Lava lovers live in shadow of Hawaii’s volcano

Warm glow felt by homeowners isn’t just from the view

By Mark Niesse
ASSOCIATED PRESS

KALAPANA, Hawaii — As fiery lava pours down Kilauea volcano toward Jean Olson’s lonely wooden house, incinerating everything in its path, there’s no place she’d rather be.

“Why would I live here if I didn’t like it? I have the best view of anyone in town,” said Olson, who lives just over a mile from fountains of glowing lava spewing into the ocean. “Either she comes or she doesn’t. If she comes, we’ll pick up and leave.”

Thousands of visitors a day come to nearby Hawaii Volcanoes National Park to watch Kilauea erupt, something it has been doing for a quarter-century. But some residents live with the boiling lava every day and revel in the notion that their homes and lives are subject to the whims of Earth’s awesome underground forces.

The danger has become clearer in recent weeks. Last month, a two-block-wide swath of lava burned through abandoned homes and reached the ocean. And the first gas explosion at Kilauea’s peak since 1924 scattered gravel onto a tourist lookout, road and trail before daybreak, injuring no one but spreading fear.

Olson and her scattered neighbors have built houses atop blasted land of hardened black crust where previous neighborhoods were destroyed by lava flows in 1990. Most get their power from solar panels, their water from the rain and some of their food from gardens planted between lava rocks. Until a new lava-viewing area began drawing big crowds last month, they lived in relative isolation.

“This is heaven on Earth,” said Edmund Orian, who is building a house by hand out of lava rocks in Kalapana.



Marco Garcia ASSOCIATED PRESS

Thousands live at the base of Kilauea on Hawaii’s Big Island, from which lava has flowed almost continuously since 1983.

“Living near a volcano keeps you aware that God is in control. If the lava comes, we can always move.”

Kilauea has not been the kind of volcano that shoots lava from its summit into the sky, causing widespread destruction for miles around. Instead, it has been a shield volcano, or one that oozes lava from fissures in its sides, giving residents at least a few hours’ warning before the lava reaches their property. An estimated 8,500 people live in the Pahoa-Kalapana area at the volcano’s base on the southeastern section of the Big Island.

In the 25 years of Kilauea’s latest eruption, lava has not directly caused any deaths, according to National Park Service rangers, though there have been five fatalities when sightseers fell, got burned or suffered heart attacks.

Brenda Quihano witnessed the volcano obliterate her family’s home in 1984, but her family wants to move back if Kilauea ever calms down a bit. She now lives in the Hawaiian Beaches neighborhood about 15 miles away, and the approaching lava doesn’t scare her.

“If you worry about something and it doesn’t happen, you look like a fool,” said Quihano as she sold water, flashlights and cameras to volcano viewers. “I’m more scared of people than I am a volcano.”

Lava recently destroyed four

old structures in the mostly abandoned Royal Gardens subdivision, though two residents there refuse to move out. The molten rock has cut off Royal Gardens from the rest of the island, and the neighborhood is now accessible only by motorcycle, all-terrain vehicle or helicopter.

The current flow comes within 600 feet of the new viewing area, where people can watch the lava roll toward the ocean as it creates thick steam and new land.

It is difficult to forecast where the lava will go next or when the next major explosion will come, said Dave Wilson, a seismologist at Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. Significant activity would probably be preceded by hundreds of small earthquakes.

“At that point, you can say, ‘Hey, we need to get everyone out of here because this looks like something bad is going to happen,’” Wilson said.

When that time comes, resident Gary Smith will be ready to forsake his two-story house.

“It’s no big deal. You make peace with that when you build here,” said Smith, who moved in three years ago.

Besides easy access to the ocean and lava reflections that paint the sky orange, there’s another reason people choose to live near the volcano: the price of land.

Property atop lava rock that could be overrun again at any time doesn’t sell for much, and no developer is going to spend much on infrastructure for a neighborhood that has disappeared before and will probably do so again.

Olson said she paid \$3,000 for about six acres in 2000, and Smith put down \$95,000 for 21 acres in 2005.

Resident Brad Wetmore has hosted a few “lava parties” where guests bring smoked salmon, caviar and drinks and then watch the glowing sky.

“They have no fear whatsoever of the lava. They invite the spectacle of seeing it on a daily basis,” he said. “We live with it, not against it.”

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