

SUN TRAVEL

To the top of Mother Mountain

El Salvador's Volcan Santa Ana worth the climb

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Special to the Toronto Sun

At last, the summit — the top of the highest active volcano in El Salvador. Volcan Santa Ana — nearly 2,440 metres above the nearby Pacific Ocean and towering over the classic cone of neighbouring Volcan Izalco — is known as Mother Mountain to the Maya people.

Breathless, our family party of five looked out on the vista from the knife-edge summit ridge.

It was startling. On one side the views stretched out past Volcan Izalco to forever across this small Central American country: Lush, tropical valleys, Lago de Coatepeque, a large crater lake sparkling in the middle distance, and purple outlines of more volcanoes on the horizon, with just a hint of the Pacific Ocean — all below a cloudless, azure sky.

But behind us, what a contrast! White billows of cloud and smoke welled up from beneath our feet driven by a fierce wind that howled about our ears sending us scurrying to don our cold-weather gear. The intense white clouds boiled upwards, streaming into the sky above us and disappearing magically as if instantly melting in the intense blue sky.

The trail that had led us to this point started at a trailhead in the forest-jungle. It was at the end

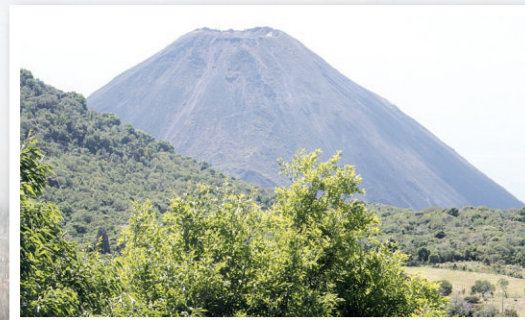
of a brutally rough dirt track leading deep into Los Volcanes National Park, part of the Apeneca-Illamatpec UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Jorge, our knowledgeable and affable guide for this hike, dived into the gap in the trees up a trail that, whilst steep and a scramble in places, is ultimately achievable by most people. Our family group comprised one teenager, two 20-some-things and two fifty-something-mores.

As we gained altitude, the jungle thinned, the views gathered distance, the bird song faded away. The landscape became more rugged, the vegetation more bizarre. Trees gave way to 5-metre-high flowering magueys — plants seemingly from another planet. A rosette of spiky leaves at the base, after 10 to even 50 years the plant matures and throws up a tall, bare flower stalk bearing what look like plates of mustard-yellow flowers. It then promptly dies.

Bare lava flows stood out starkly under an indigo sky. Jorge cheerfully told us the last major eruption was as recent as 2007. Then there was no more vegetation — just our lava trail winding up over fresh lava fields to this precipitous ridge welled in by cloud on one side and limitless views on the



The cone of El Salvador's Volcan Izalco, seen from nearby Volcan Santa Ana.



CHRIS ROBINSON PHOTOS

A view of the sulphurous emerald-coloured crater lake at El Salvador's Volcan Santa Ana, called Mother Mountain by locals. Chris Robinson, left, is on top of the world at the summit.

other.

"Look at the clouds!" Jorge yelled into the wind.

We turned away from the infinite vista to the opaque, writhing mantle of smoke. And then the gale abruptly changed direction and the clouds hurtled away from us, as if wraiths chased by angels.

In an instant, like a curtain drawn aside, the ground opened

up beneath our feet and a 500-metre vertical drop appeared, plummeting to a vivid green sulphurous lake below as we gazed in awe into the depths of the crater. The reveal was dramatic. A stark and lifeless alien world, with fumaroles, impossible cliffs of lava and ash, and a sulphuric acid lake adding a startling clash of poisonous green to the otherwise colourless abyss.

Moments later, the wraiths returned screaming in the wind and the inner crater was swallowed up again.

Mother Mountain's breath washed over us and we were suit-

able awed.

NEED TO KNOW

El Salvador is easily accessible this fall and winter on packages from Nolitours (nolitours.com) with direct flights from Toronto and Montreal to San Salvador and stays at the 4-star all-inclusive Royal Decameron Salinitas resort on the Pacific coast. From here the volcano hike is a day trip best experienced with Cuscatlan Tours, a local guiding company with personal service, who can take you afterwards to soak tired limbs in the therapeutic warmth of nearby Santa Teresa hot springs.