

Artist and adventurer Carsten Peter took this photo a mere 20 feet from the turbulent magma of Mount Etna in Sicily.

## Extremist Views

By Joelle Seligson

The National Geographic Society made national news this spring for the adorable duck family that took residence in the courtyard of its Washington, D.C., complex. Shortly after the baby mallards made their *Today* show debut, they were replaced by erupting volcanoes, steep shafts of ice and caves the size of skyscrapers. These are the subjects of “Formation: Earth in Motion,” an outdoor exhibition of photography by artist and adventurer Carsten Peter.

The exhibition is meant to showcase the ever-changing nature of nature. Peter explains on the show’s webpage: “When I photograph extreme environments—the volcano, the tornado, the glacier—each is entirely different, but they have one thing in common: You are in a situation with an uncertain outcome.”

April was an interesting time for an exhibit on unpredictable natural phenomena. An earthquake and tsunami had devastated Japan about a week before, filling newspaper pages and TV screens with visual proof of nature’s destructive force. Open through Sept. 20, “Formation” also was on view when tornadoes ravaged the American South. While National Geographic has long been synonymous with dramatic environmental scenes, this display was particularly poignant and in some ways jarring.

An Emmy and World Press Photo winner, Peter is a regular contributor to *National Geographic Magazine*. The images in “Formation” were selected from his many magazine assignments over the past decade or so. Peter is also a rock climber, scuba diver,

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paraglider, caver and canyoneer. Going to extremes is his specialty. It has been since he was a 17-year-old German kid perched on the crater rim of Mt. Stromboli, an active volcano north of Sicily, to get his shot.

The opening image of “Formation” features present-day Peter, now in his early 50s. He is wearing a red jumpsuit, yellow walkie-talkie slung around his neck, grizzled and grinning and giving two thumbs-ups as massive clouds of smoke—emitted by Indonesia’s Mt. Semeru—rise behind him.

Volcanic activity dominates the 41 photos, suspended in lightboxes set into the exterior walls of National Geographic’s 17th Street galleries. Many are close-ups; lava seems to nearly splash onto the lens. Indeed, in one nighttime shot, the molten glow of Nyiragongo—a volcano located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—is balanced by the cooler radiance of a white tent nearby. Peter and his accompanying research team pitched their base camp a mere quarter-mile above the lava lake that boils in Nyiragongo’s belly at nearly 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. During another

volcanic photo shoot, this time of Mt. Etna in Italy, Peter worked in a respirator and helmet less than 20 feet from the liquid-hot magma. (Thank you, Dr. Evil.)

On the opposite end of the thermometer are shots of glaciers, cool, soft blues balancing the red-hotness of the volcano series. But there is little tranquility here. In some instances, Peter had to descend into deep, often unstable glacial caves. One photo looks up a sharply vertical, seemingly infinite ice tunnel. Three spelunkers cling to its frosty walls as they rappel down some 300 feet into a glacier cave in Greenland. In another image, an explorer dangles from a giant stalactite of ice.

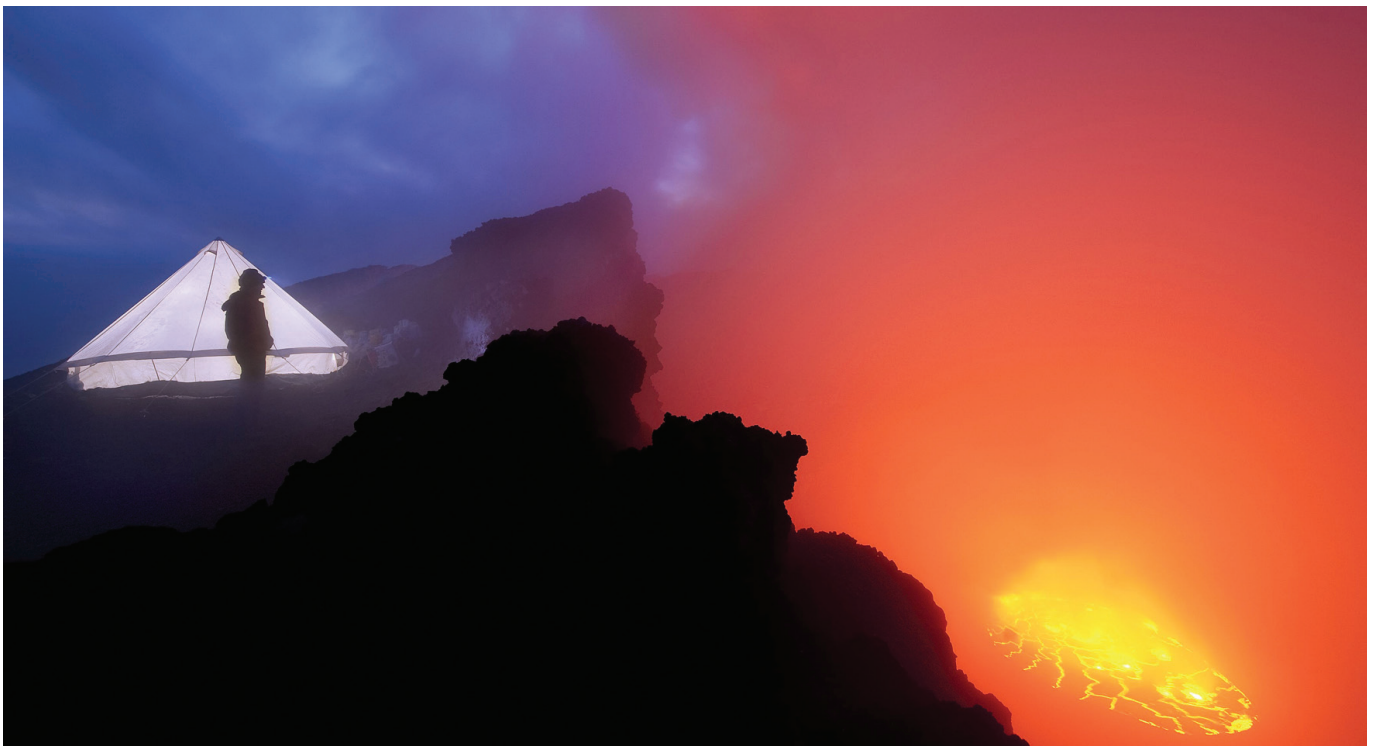
Along with the extreme, Peter is drawn to the unexplored. Many of his photographs are of sites that had rarely before been entered, much less documented. An expedition first entered Vietnam’s Hang Son Doong, or “mountain river cave,” in 2009. But it wasn’t until the team returned with Peter that the caves were presented to the world—and the world took notice. His photos went viral

in early 2011, scoring more than 13.2 million page views for National Geographic’s website, the most hits ever received by one of its online photo galleries.

Hang Son Doong is in fact a cave system more than 2.5 miles long, with a passage running through it that can reach more than 600 feet high and 300 feet wide. An entire jungle thrives inside. As described in the article “Conquering an Infinite Cave” in the January 2011 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, some areas of the cave have “enough room for an entire New York City block of 40-story buildings.”

Peter managed to convey this magnitude. Explorers are seen as miniscule dots floating in a green lagoon far below an enormous cave column that arcs above them. One appears as a tiny Lego figure atop a boulder, in what is in fact a half-mile long stretch of cave—possibly the world’s biggest subterranean passage.

A few years prior, and on the opposite side of the globe, Peter recorded another new discovery: Mexico’s Cueva de los Cristales, or “Cave of Crystals,” which



A lava lake at Nyiragongo, a volcano in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Adventurers rappel down the sides of a glacier cave in Greenland.

miners stumbled upon in 2000. Nearly 1,000 feet below ground, the limestone cavern is a crisscross maze of giant, glittering beams of selenite. It is also a steaming 112 degrees Fahrenheit with nearly 100 percent humidity, as evidenced by the sweat glistening on an explorer's forehead in one of the shots.

It is difficult to conceive of blistering heat or frigid arctic winds while standing outside the National Geographic's galleries on a breezy spring afternoon, or to imagine a volcano's roars and hisses above the drone of passing traffic. It's also a bit hard to see the actual photos through the lightboxes, which even in late afternoon tend to reflect the surrounding buildings. (Then again, this is one of the few exhibits in Washington that is relatively tourist-free at this time of year—not to mention on view 24 hours a day.)

Along with compromising the view, this setting doesn't evoke a sense of respect for the works. Reflecting National Geographic's focus, the labels—small but

adequate white boxes below the photographs—concentrate as much on the science behind these wonders as the process of capturing them on film. But it is clear that Peter and the researchers literally risked life and limb to access these remote sites and reveal them to the world.

In addition, any image of natural phenomena strikes a somber tone these days. Interestingly, there are no photos of tornadoes on display, though Peter's website ([carstenpeter.com](http://carstenpeter.com)) shows that storm-chasing shots constitute a large part of his repertoire. There are also no photographs of earthquakes or tsunamis.

One picture strikes home, however: a wide view of the town of Plymouth, capital of Montserrat, located less than 3 miles from a volcano that, long dormant, became active with a series of huge eruptions starting in 1995. Plymouth was pummeled with flows of rock and mud, buried beneath nearly 5 feet of ash and ultimately abandoned in 1997. Peter's shot shows the aftermath: a desolate ghost

town, with houses and cars half-buried in a rippled sheet of brown.

The scene is not identical to those created by the tsunami in Japan, but it is certainly reminiscent. At this stage, a few months after the disaster and accompanying media onslaught, viewers might benefit from a more subdued (read: indoor) setting to contemplate this kind of devastation.

"Formation: Earth in Motion" is complemented by the wealth of images and information on National Geographic's website. Unfortunately, related material is not organized underneath the heading of the exhibition; that page gives only a brief synopsis. But searching "Carsten Peter" on [ngm.com](http://ngm.com) yields links featuring high-resolution versions of the photos displayed in D.C., along with magazine articles, videos and interactives exploring the sites he has documented. It may be a preferable way to view these images, which warrant the time to zoom in, glare-free, in a quiet room. ●