

# MEET THE DORMANT GIANTS OF RURAL FRANCE

By Kevin Bonnaud

The Auvergne, known for its green wide-open spaces and large variety of cheese, is ranked sixth out of ten regions to visit in the world in 2016 by Lonely Planet. The Chaîne des Puys, a row of 80 volcanoes, could join the list of UNESCO heritage sites this July. A windfall for a relatively isolated area and for Vulcania, a scientific and educational theme park about volcanoes, which now attracts 350,000 people every year.

Visiting Vulcania begins in the air, in a helium balloon, if the weather is not too windy. The 10 minutes' flight provides a spectacular view of the Chaîne des Puys. The Puy de Dôme, the most famous volcano of all, is 1,465 m high. "These are young volcanoes, less than 100,000 years old, extinct or dormant since their last and often only eruption just 7,000 years ago", Gilles, the Vulcania tour guide told hiEurope.

Up here, it's easy to see the park's infrastructure,

a large grey cone representing a volcano, and a 40-metre-deep artificial crater which contains rock from a volcano. Opened in 2002, the park was built on three levels in a 30,000 year old lava flow. Inside, the visitor finds more than a museum. There are dynamic attractions with special effects, and workshops simulating a volcanic eruption.

## A new approach to science

"Our visitors come to Vulcania to have fun, but they always learn something about volcanoes and earth science in every attraction", says François Dominique de la Rousière, Vulcania's scientific director. "We want to share the passion for adventure and knowledge by showing that science is not boring, but an exciting experience."

A 4D movie shows the awakening of the Auvergne volcanoes and the consequences on the fauna and flora using water jets, fragrances, ticklers and moving seats. Next is a 2500-metre-deep submarine exploration on a moving platform, to discover an often unknown biodiversity. We learn that underwater volcanoes represent 90% of all volcanic activity, but this goes often unnoticed. Vulcania also focuses on other natural phenomena. The movie Tornado Alley features the expeditions of storm chasers in the United States, who collect key data to handle the risks and limit casualties.

## Understanding our planet

There is always a museum area between two attractions. Right at the entrance, several models represent the different kinds of volcanoes we can find in Auvergne. Visitors learn how to

tell the difference between effusive eruptions (red volcanoes) and explosive eruptions (grey volcanoes). In another room, Gilles the tour guide explains how magma comes from the earth's mantle, helped by an interactive floor. "The thinnest plates stretch out and create a path for the magma. The magma then drills the mantle to generate volcanoes on the surface", he says.

Outside, the volcanic garden created with tree ferns from New Zealand shows the fertility of volcanic soil. "Volcanic eruptions have a positive impact on vegetation. That's why many people have settled near volcanoes", Gilles says, adding that 10% of the world population lives under the direct threat of a volcano.

Walking through the garden, we get to the lower level and a tunnel, which features a movie about the dangers of pyroclastic flows and surges which can reach up to 20 km. This happened during the eruption of the Mount St Helens (US) in 1980.

We end with a tribute to Maurice and Katia Krafft, two French volcanologists who died during the eruption of Mount Unzen in Japan in 1991. The scientists were the first to come up with the idea of creating an information center about volcanoes in Auvergne. They didn't live to see this park, but their discoveries live on.



## TIPS

Vulcania

📍 Direction: 15 km from Clermont-Ferrand, 190 km west of Lyon  
🌐 www.vulcania.com