

In this photograph, a young boy is walking on a beach, from right to left. He is holding his toy, a long wooden stick with small wheels, and under his bare feet, the sand is black. Behind him to the right, across a lagoon of murky blue water, is a volcano, spewing a dark cloud of ash. It dominates the top half of the image and obscures the view of a vibrant blue sky.

The smoke from the volcano is so thick it looks like a solid form, twisting and rolling across the photograph in shades of grey and black. The giant plume drifts across the water, passes over the boy's head and continues beyond the far reaches of the frame. He is draped in a vibrant green towel and wears shorts. His name is Munganau.

He isn't looking at the erupting volcano. Instead, he is transfixed on his toy – a stick with a wheel fashioned in the middle and two small wheels at the end – which he made himself. Tufts of dry grass are dotted around his bare feet, while a few dead branches lie washed up on the shoreline.

I captured this photograph, called 'Munganau Walks Home,' during one of my many trips to Matupit in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea.

Munganau, like all the children who call this place home, has lived in the shadow of Tavurvur, this violent, active volcano, for his entire life.

The blackened sand and the clouds of ash haven't always shrouded this place. In fact, before 1994, when Tavurvur began its frequent eruptions, the immaculate waters of the Bismarck Sea, the lush forests, and pristine beaches painted a picture of an idyllic paradise, bursting with colour and life.

For those who live there, the active volcano has made life hard. It regularly spits huge gas and ash clouds into the sky, leaving everything buried under a black blanket.

When rainfall passes through the rising gas clouds, it turns into acid rain, spoiling the crops, the vegetation and the drinking water. The ashes cling to everything: hair, clothes, mouth and lungs. Health problems, especially for the children, are common.

But despite the hardships Tavurvur bestows on them, the villagers have stayed on their customary land, surrounded by the sea.

Every evening, the children gather at the shore to wash away the ashes and to play.

The eruption on this evening was nothing new to them, even though the volcano was making thunderous noises, and violently hurling ash into the sky.

To me, I saw a wonderful image unfolding, especially with Munganau's indifference to the natural phenomenon happening behind him. He didn't look up. It was normal to him, so he carried on, in his own world, playing and being happy.

And although we may not comprehend, Munganau and the other children here are happy.

Yet watching these children living in the ruins of their former paradise is humbling. I was born in Germany, where we undoubtedly have a more comfortable life. We have clean air, clean running water, fertile soil, we have electricity, cars and large shopping centres.

They don't, but those who live near Tavurvur never seem to focus on what they don't have, but on what they do have. Their optimism is astonishing. They could complain every day about their houses being buried in ashes, about having no food in their gardens, no fresh

water for drinking or for washing, about hanging up clean clothes that get dirtier when they hang them on the line. But they don't.

This photograph of Munganau, taken using a Canon 5D, shows how adaptable, resilient and resourceful humans can be. And how they can thrive even in the harshest environments.

Over time, the villagers have adapted in so many ways. One of them is their relationship with a small, chickenlike bird called megapode. The megapode lays eggs in the hot volcanic soil – sometimes up to two metres deep – so Tavurvur incubates them. Not only do the villagers harvest the eggs to sustain themselves, but they use them to predict whether the volcano is likely to explode again.

Before the volcano erupts, ascending gases will heat the ground and therefore, the megapode will lay the eggs closer to the surface.

And while this image is a shining example of the optimism of the human spirit, it also shows us both the majesty and the ferocity of nature, and how it communicates with us. Sometimes it screams, loudly and violently, in the form of an eruption.

Other times it's more subtle. Amidst the black sand in the photograph, hot under Munganau's feet, there are small patches of white. It could be mistaken for frost. It isn't. It's a small but significant indicator of how the landscape changes before an eruption.

Of all the wonders in nature, volcanoes are among the most compelling. They are about being alive. Fully alive. I've stood on top of the crater of this very volcano when it exploded.

I looked down at the bubbling, boiling heart of the earth, and although it could have crushed me, it didn't. It made me feel grateful. Because I was standing on the line between life and death, and nothing happened to me.

I believe if more people could see an erupting volcano, the world would be a better place. Because next to a volcano, we feel that nature is above us. Volcanoes, which were here long before us and will be long after us, leave us awe-struck about the power of the natural world.

And while volcanoes can destroy everything around them, they are also bringers of life, enriching the soil and creating the foundation of the luscious ecosystems we thrive from.

As for Tavurvur, it has been quiet lately. I have been visiting this place for decades, and recently I witnessed what Munganau and the other villagers are seeing: that slowly but surely, as the volcano sleeps, vegetation and life begins to flourish, and paradise returns.