

Photos courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey

When Mauna Loa erupted on the Big Island of Hawaii in 1984, stimulating the subsequent on-going eruptions of Kilauea and nearby volcanic activity, it created a mile-wide river of lava that flowed east to the sea and north toward Hilo, stopping just a mile above the city.

The fiery soul of Hawaii

How a capricious goddess captured a heart and launched a career

By Aysha Griffin
For The New Mexican

Editor's note: Aysha Griffin, a Santa Fe resident who owns Go Realty Santa Fe, recently won an honorable mention for this story in the travel essay category at the Travel Writers & Photographers conference in California.

"She likes to disguise herself as an old woman hitchhiker," said Keahi, a gentle Hawaiian soul. I had been too unnerved to drive on and stopped at the first place I came to, which was his roadside fruit stand near Hapuna Beach. I spilled my guts to this friendly vendor who noticed my upset and asked, "Ya see one ghost?"

I laughed nervously. "Yeah. I think so."

I was driving across the north side of the Big Island, from Hilo to Kona, when at the turnoff to the lush and famously sacred Waipio Valley, an old woman with wild white hair and dressed in a white muumuu was thumbing a ride.

She got in my rental car, motioning with her chin to drive on. I tried to make conversation, but she just nodded and closed her eyes. A few miles later, eyes still shut, she fanned her palm downward, which I took to mean "Slow down" and pointed to a large rock mound, a *heiau*, or sacred place. I

pulled over.

She got out, turned to me with luminous brown eyes and in a deep monotone said, "We will meet again." I drove away thinking, "Crazy woman!" In my rearview mirror, I watched her stride toward the mound, a small white dog having magically appeared at her side.

"That be her!" Keahi laughed, his broad tanned belly shaking beneath a sleeveless undershirt. "You met Madam Pele, goddess of the volcano." As if that was a common occurrence.

"Hey, broda," he yelled to a group of men playing cards at a nearby picnic table, "come here. This *haole* did meet Pele."

One of the men, even larger of gut than the fruit-stand owner, sauntered over, beer bottle in hand. "This be Samuel. He be a *kahuna*, a shaman."

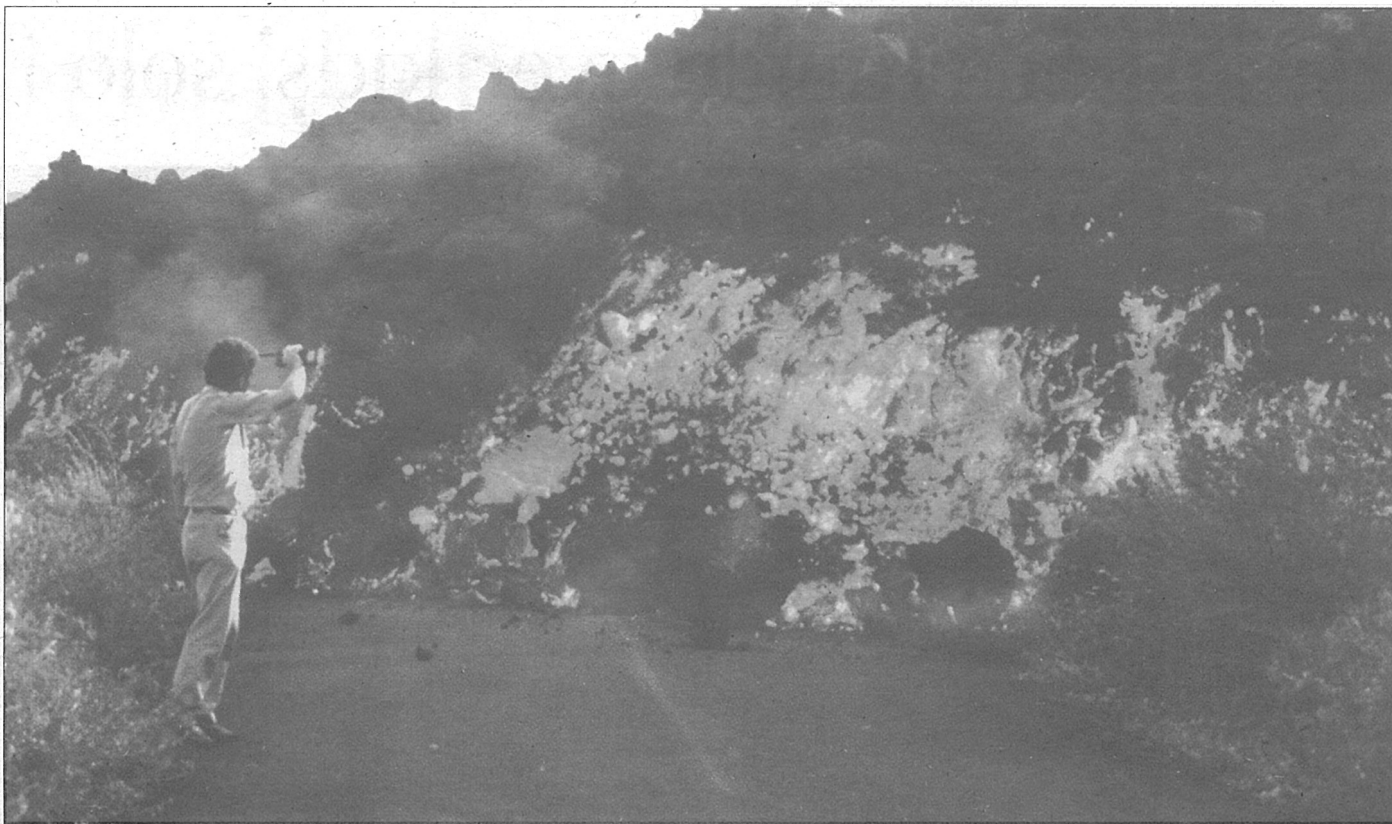
Samuel solemnly shook my hand, and Keahi encouraged me to tell the story again. At the end, Samuel concurred, "That be Pele, for sure. You not from here, girl?"

"No, just visiting for the first time, a vacation from winter in Alaska."

He furrowed his broad brow. "Alaska? There be volcanos there too."

"Maybe. I've only been there a year, working as a reporter."

"A reporter?" He turned to his *broda* and added, "Pele must



As Madam Pele erupts, numerous fingers of lava flow in a myriad of directions, incinerating and obliterating whatever is in her way. This scientist from Volcanoes National Observatory is heedless of the danger.

be up to something if she wants a reporter to know.”
“Know what?” I asked.



In my week of twice circumnavigating the Big Island of cactus-laden ranch lands, tropical rain forests, snow-dusted mountains and barren lava fields rimmed in black-, white- and green-sand beaches, I learned that Kama’aina, native Hawaiians, are informed by the shape shifting of *‘aina*, the land, the Mother, created by the spewing forth of lava from the mantle of the Earth, adding another square mile of real estate every 20 years.

Hawaii is a land of myth, of *menehune*, the mythical elflike people, and of sacred stories and life’s rhythms enacted in hula dances, chants and music. Hawaiians cherish Ohana, or extended family, and revere the Goddess Pele, who makes her home in the world’s largest volcano, Kilauea, on the “long mountain” called Mauna Loa, with a summit 13,680 feet high.

It is believed this beautiful Mother, when enraged, literally explodes, having done so at least 35 times since Pakeha, or white men, arrived in the early 1800s. Scientists say she’s been doing her thing for at least 700,000 years and may have another million years left until the Pacific Plate drifts her home away from the hot spot in the Earth’s mantle that formed the Hawaiian Islands.

Because I am a third-generation New Yorker, palm trees, warm blue oceans and joyful near-naked people with coffee-colored skin who worship the power of nature were as foreign to me as they would have been to my Lithuanian ancestors. My people are comfortable in skyscraper canyons, stoically believing life is hard, nothing worthwhile exists west of the Hudson, and all myths are primitive mumbo-jumbo. I left home at 17 in search of connection to nature and a loving community with rich traditions, what Hawaiians call “aloha spirit.”

I did not know, as I stood on the warm golden sand with Keahi and Samuel, that within weeks I would leave Alaska and move to the Big Island for a newspaper reporter’s job in Kailua-Kona, or that I would meet Pele again, undisguised, two years later.

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Late Saturday night, March 24, 1984, I was alone on the lanai of the Hilo Hawaiian Hotel, 80 feet in the air, when I had my second encounter with Madam Pele.

In the penthouse behind me were fans of Eddie Fisher, whose performance earlier that evening I was sent to review. They were partying, oblivious to the frightful power brewing upon Mauna Loa.

That’s when I saw her, goddess of fire, over the tops of banyan trees, waltzing across the mountain ridge cloaked in amber and crimson, making a grand entrance onto the stage of our lives.

A month before, I had been hired as on-air news director for a radio station in Hilo. Nick, the new owner, wanted to beef up his news department, and I liked the idea of moving from printed news to the immediacy of broadcast. This night, thanks to Eddie Fisher, I came to be the reporter who broke the big story.

Although KHLO went off the air at midnight, I immediately phoned Nick at home. “Mauna Loa’s erupting!” I yelled into his ear, awakening him at 1:30 in the morning.

“Get down to the station now! We’ll go on emergency power,” he shouted back.

Throughout the night and for three more weeks, I broadcast news around the clock of Pele’s extravagant show, in constant communication with scientists at the U.S. Geological Survey’s Hawaii Volcano Observatory and Harry Kim, civil defense chief and later mayor of the Big Island.

I fielded calls from news services around the globe and rode in helicopters tossed about by dangerous updrafts over the blazing *ohia* forests. I walked with camera crews across the smoldering wake of destruction, melting the soles of our boots, burning our nostrils and lungs with thick, black, sulfur dioxide-filled air. I watched with the world as fountains of lava shot thousands of feet into the sky like a pyrotechnician’s dream. A river of fire grew wide as the Mississippi River, submerging roads and homes and the village of Kalapana as Pele danced toward the sea.

Meanwhile, another of her arms, a brilliant yellow-red molten-rock river, reached toward the city of Hilo. Harry Kim and the National Guard considered bombing to divert her fury. Traditional ceremonies were held throughout the island, like one I attended on the beach with Keahi and Samuel and hundreds of their Ohana, beseeching Pele to be merciful.

On April 21, our goddess obviously changed her mind, and the lava stopped within a mile of the upper portions of the city. Exhausted residents sighed with relief, and I went home to sleep.

Sometimes I think I dreamed this. It was more than 20 years ago. But even in memory, where fact and fiction are interchangeable, the magic of Hawaii’s myths remains real. In contrast to Hawaiians, whose ancient family trees have been scorched and regenerated by the volcano goddess, I can claim only a brief singe from her deep power.

Madam Pele chose me to witness her magnificence and experience the passionate warmth of her people. She directed me straight to the heart of Hawaii and connected me to *‘aina*, the Earth, the Mother, my home.