



SACRED MOUNTAINS

▲ Climbers normally begin their ascent of Mount Fuji around noon, so they can stand at the top of Japan's highest mountain at sunrise the next morning.

- 1 Volcanoes are both creators and destroyers.
They can shape lands and cultures, but can also
cause great destruction and loss of life. Two of
the best-known examples are found at opposite
5 ends of the world, separated by the Pacific
Ring of Fire.

FUJI: JAPAN'S SACRED SUMMIT

- It's almost sunrise near the summit of Japan's
10 Mount Fuji. Exhausted climbers, many of
whom have hiked the 3,776 meters (12,388
feet) through the night to reach this point,
stop to watch as the sun begins its ascent,¹
spreading its golden rays across the mountain.
15 For everyone, this is an important moment:
they have **witnessed** the **dawn** on Mount
Fuji—the highest point in the Land of the
Rising Sun.²

- Located in the center of Japan, Mount Fuji
20 (whose name means “without equal”) is a
sacred site. Japan's native religion, Shintoism,
considers Fuji a **holy** place. Other people
believe the mountain and its waters have
the power to make a sick person well. For
25 many, climbing Fuji is also a rite of passage.
Some do it as part of a religious journey; for

- others, it is a test of strength. Whatever their
reason, reaching the top in order to stand on
Fuji's summit at sunrise is a must for many
30 Japanese—and every July and August, almost
400,000 people attempt to do so.

- Fuji is more than a sacred³ site and tourist
destination, however. It is also an active
volcano around which four million people
35 have settled and sits just 112 kilometers (70
miles) from the crowded streets of Tokyo. The
last time Fuji exploded, in 1707, it sent out a
cloud of ash that covered the capital city and
darkened the skies for weeks.

- 40 Today new data have some volcanologists
concerned that Fuji may soon erupt again.
According to Motoo Ukawa and his associates
at the National Research Institute for Earth
Science and **Disaster** Prevention, there has
45 been an increase in activity under Fuji recently,
which may be caused by low-frequency
earthquakes. Understanding what causes these
quakes may help scientists predict when Fuji,
the biggest of Japan's 86 active volcanoes,
50 will come back to life. In the meantime, locals
living near Fuji hold special festivals each year
to offer gifts to the goddess of the volcano—
as they have for generations—so that she
will not erupt and destroy the land and its
55 people below.

¹ An **ascent** is an upward movement.

² Japan is sometimes called **the Land of the Rising Sun**.

³ If something is **sacred**, it is believed to have a connection to God and should be given respect.



▲ Near El Popo's summit, locals offer gifts to the volcano.

POPOCATÉPETL: MEXICO'S SMOKING MOUNTAIN

Halfway across the globe from Fuji, Popocatepetl—one of the world's tallest and most dangerous active volcanoes—stands just 60 kilometers (37 miles) southeast of Mexico City. Although the volcano (whose name means “smoking mountain”) has erupted many times over the centuries, scientists believe its last great explosion occurred around 820 A.D. In recent years, however, El Popo, as Mexicans call the mountain, has been threatening to explode once more; in December 2000, almost 26,000 people were evacuated when El Popo started to send out ash and smoke. As with all active volcanoes, the question is not if it will erupt again (an eruption is **inevitable**); the question is when it will happen.

“Every volcano works in a different way,” explains Carlos Valdés González, a scientist who **monitors** El Popo. “What we’re trying to learn here are the symptoms signaling that El Popo will erupt.” These include earthquakes or any sign that the mountain’s surface is changing or **expanding**. The hope is that scientists will be able to warn people in the

surrounding areas so they have enough time to escape. A powerful eruption could **displace** over 20 million people—people whose lives would be saved if the warning is delivered early enough.

For many people living near El Popo—especially the farmers—**abandoning** their land is unthinkable. As anyone who farms near a volcano knows, the world’s richest soils are volcanic. They produce bananas and coffee in Central America, fine wines in California, and enormous amounts of rice in Indonesia. For this reason, people will stay on their land, even if they face danger.

Today many people who live near El Popo continue to see the mountain as their **ancestors** did. According to ancient beliefs, a volcano can be a god, a mountain, and a human all at the same time. To appease⁴ El Popo and to ensure rain and a good harvest, locals begin a cycle of ceremonies that start in March and end in August. Carrying food and gifts for the volcano, they hike up the mountain. Near the summit, they present their offerings, asking the volcano to protect and provide for one more season.

⁴ If you **appease** someone, you try to stop them from being angry by giving them something they want.

▼ Children play on swings within sight of the smoking Popocatepetl.

