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Opening extract from

100 Most Awesome Things on the Planet

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100 MOST AWESOME THINGS ON THE PLANET

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INTRODUCTION

The world we live in is a truly awesome place. Across its massive continents, deep oceans, and swirling skies are all kinds of fabulous places, amazing events, and astonishing sights. You'll get a little glimpse of many of them in this book.

NATURAL WONDERS

Although there are billions of humans on the planet, we're still just a tiny part of the natural world around us. We might feel in control, but the world is filled with fearsome forces that are much more powerful than we are—from giant creatures of the deep to heaving volcanoes, roaring waves, and weather that's wild, deadly, or plain weird. If this book makes you feel a bit small and helpless compared to the awesome power of the planet, that's because you are!

ALL OUR OWN WORK

We've achieved some pretty awesome stuff, too. Thanks to advances in human technology, we've built vast bridges, superfast speed machines, towering skyscrapers, perfect pyramids, and many other mind-boggling structures. Some of these mysterious monuments date from so far back in time, we don't even know how our awesome ancestors managed to make them—or why. Just think what people hundreds or thousands of years in the future might make of the things we build today!

ON THE PLANET—AND OFF THE PLANET!

This book also includes a few of the awesome wonders of space. Okay, so they're not strictly "on the planet"—but they're things we have spotted in our skies and can enjoy from our vantage point here on Earth. There are also a few amazing machines that we've sent into space ourselves.



The Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird, the fastest manned, air-breathing aircraft.

WARNING!

A lot of the awesome things in this book are places you can go and visit—and there's nothing like seeing an erupting volcano, a giant waterfall, or a mysterious ruin with your own eyes. But if you do, remember that many awesome things can also be risky. Always stick to tourist trails, follow the advice of local guides, and obey safety signs and instructions.

AWESOME RATING

- ..... Cool!
- ..... Really cool!
- ..... Totally amazing!
- ..... Incredible!
- .... Completely awesome!



AWESOME NATURAL WONDERS

In this section you'll come face-to-face with the awesome forces and features of our natural world—from mighty tsunami waves, sky-high waterfalls, and exploding volcanoes to the world's most amazing cliffs, rivers and lakes, spooky caves, and deadly storms, and all the strange phenomena that fill our night sky. You'll also meet some of the world's most bizarre and beautiful living things, and encounter some incredible animal behavior.

A gigantic wave about to wash away a car during a powerful storm in California.

MOUNT EVEREST

AWESOMENESS

Huge, bulky, and brooding, Mount Everest is an unbelievable sight—and even more magnificent if you get to the top!



The jagged edges jutting into the air on Everest's slopes are awesomely dangerous.

You can't stand anywhere higher on the earth than on the top of Mount Everest. The world's highest mountain is a massive, snow- and ice-topped chunk of rock in the Himalayas, a huge mountain range that lies in the middle of Asia.

BREATHTAKING

At 29,035 feet (8,850 m) high, Everest's peak is an awesome place to be. It's also icy cold, battered by hurricane-force winds, and the air contains less oxygen than it does at sea level. So unless you have an oxygen mask, it's very hard to breathe up there.

CLIMBING EVEREST

In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first to reach the top of Everest and make it back home. Since then, another 3,000 people have managed it.

STILL RISING

The Himalayas were created when two landmasses, India and the rest of Asia, crashed into each other 50 million years ago, pushing the land up into a mountain range. The land is still moving, and so the Himalayas are still growing.

Climbing Everest is dangerous. You have to travel across steep ice slopes, use ladders to cross crevasses, and keep yourself warm.

DEADLY RIVAL 28,251 feet (8,611 m) tall, K2 in Pakistan and China is the second-highest mountain in the world. It may be only the second tallest, but it is harder to climb. It's killed a quarter of those who've tried to climb it.

KILAUEA

How would you like to stand on the world's most active volcano? Well, actually, you can! It sounds scary, but because Kilauea, in Hawaii, is constantly erupting, it's safer than some other volcanoes. It usually releases its lava in a constant, gentle flow, instead of building it up until it bursts. But Kilauea is still pretty awesome!

ALWAYS ERUPTING

Kilauea is quite low for a mountain. It's a type of volcano known as a shield volcano. The lava that flows from it is runny and spreads out quickly, making the volcano wide and smooth. That makes it easier for tourists to visit the volcano and get quite close to the lava flows. It has several openings, or vents, where lava escapes. One of the vents, called Pu'u O'o, has been erupting nonstop since 1983. The lava usually streams downhill like a river, but it can also spit and splatter.

INTO THE WAVES

Kilauea is close to the sea, and a lot of its lava flows down to the shore. There, the lava crackles and explodes as it plunges into the cold water, and cools superfast. Gradually, hardened lava from the volcano builds more and more new land in the water.

Red-hot lava flows from Kilauea Volcano, Hawaii.

AWESOMENESS

It may not be the noisiest or most explosive volcano, but Kilauea lets you get up close to awesome real-life eruptions and lava flows.

GRAND CANYON

The Grand Canyon in Arizona certainly deserves the name "Grand." It's one of the biggest, most breathtaking rock formations you can see anywhere in the world.

The Grand Canyon is a gorge—a very deep, steep-sided river valley. The high cliffs on either side are striped in stunning shades of color, made up of bands of rock of different types and ages.

Some gorges are narrow, but the Grand Canyon is very wide. It varies from 600 feet to 19 miles (183 m to 30 km) across. At its deepest, it's almost 1.25 miles (2 km) deep, and it reaches nearly 280 miles (450 km) in length.

AWESOMENESS

This canyon is known around the world as one of our planet's most awesome sights.

HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

Gorges form when a river cuts through rock as it flows. Over millions of years, the Colorado River has carved its way down through the landscape to create the massive canyon. The river still flows along the bottom today.

DON'T LOOK DOWN

Nearly five million tourists visit the Grand Canyon area every year. You can take a plane or helicopter flight around it, or step out onto the Grand Canyon Skywalk, a glass-floored walkway 4,000 feet (1,219 m) above the bottom. Yikes!



The Grand Canyon, with the Colorado River flowing through it.

PULPIT ROCK

If you're scared of heights, just looking at this photo of Pulpit Rock (also called Preikestolen) is probably terrifying! This awesome natural rock formation stands about 2,000 feet (600 m) above Lysefjord, one of Norway's long, deep fjords, or sea inlets.

PICNIC TIME!

If you're brave enough, you could follow thousands of others along the steep trail up to Pulpit Rock for a day trip. In the summer, its flat, square platform is covered with visitors having picnics and enjoying the view. Leaning over the edge to peer at the 2,000-foot (600 m) drop is not a very good idea, but you can often see people lying on their stomachs to take a peek a little more safely.

AWESOMENESS

Pulpit Rock's stunning natural setting and spine-tingling awesomeness make it one of Norway's most famous natural attractions.

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME!

Because it provides such a sheer vertical drop from an almost flat platform, Pulpit Rock is a popular spot for the extreme sport of BASE jumping. Jumpers leap off the platform with a parachute and try to sail safely down to the fjord below. But this is VERY dangerous, as winds can bash the jumpers against the rock on their way down. Ouch!

People enjoying the stunning view from Pulpit Rock.

CUT BY ICE The fjords and cliffs were formed when glaciers flowed down from the mountains to the sea, cutting long, deep channels into the rock. When the ice melted, these valleys were filled by the sea.

CLIFFS OF KALAUPAPA

On the island of Molokai in Hawaii, towering over the tiny village of Kalaupapa, are some of the world's most enormous sea cliffs. Covered with tropical plants, the giant green cliffs plunge just over 3,280 feet (1,000 m) down to the sea.

STRAIGHT OR SLOPING?

There are many different types of cliffs. Some have a vertical drop, but many cliffs, like those of Kalaupapa, are more like extremely steep slopes. These cliffs are covered with thick green plant life, which is part of what makes them so strange and amazing to look at. There's even a hair-raising, winding path right on the cliff face, which you can travel down by mule.

VOLCANO LAND

All the islands of Hawaii were formed by volcanic eruptions from the sea, and these cliffs were originally part of a tall volcano. When part of the volcano fell away into the sea, the steep cliffs were left behind.

AWESOMENESS

These incredible cliffs are worth a trip all the way to Hawaii to see.

FAMOUS CLIFFS

Because the Kalaupapa cliffs look so otherworldly, they were used as part of the scenery for the movie *Jurassic Park*, which was about dinosaurs coming to life.

You can't reach Kalaupapa by car—only by boat, plane, mule, or on foot.

MOUNT THOR

If you think of a cliff as a purely vertical drop, then this is the world's biggest. The astonishing-looking Mount Thor stands on Baffin Island in the icy north of Canada. One side of it is a vast, overhanging cliff with a sheer 4,100-foot (1,250 m) drop.

CUT IN TWO

Mount Thor is made of a hard rock called granite. Its sheer shape was probably formed by ice freezing and thawing, which created cracks in the rock, causing part of it to fall away.

AWESOMENESS

Standing at the top of the world's biggest vertical drop must be completely MIND-BOGGLING!

Mount Thor and the frozen Weasel River.

BRAVE ATTEMPTS

Climbers first reached the top of Mount Thor in 1953. The mountain itself is 5,495 feet (1,675 m) above sea level. In 2006, another team decided to rappel down Mount Thor's cliff face—that is, to slide all the way down on a rope. They broke the record for the world's longest rappel.

Climbing thousands of heart-pounding feet on this sheer face is an epic experience.

DID YOU KNOW? If you dropped a pebble off the top of Mount Thor, it would take just under 16 seconds to hit the bottom.