

Don't Trust Venusian Mushrooms

Fifteen years ago, I was picked for the Explore Venus Expedition. Training was interesting and difficult, and that's all that anyone can say about it without whining. I remember the 3D-Vid interviewer asking what I hoped to accomplish, and I pondered laughing in her face, but I calmly explained that humans weren't designed to explore Venus, due to its hostile eco-system. I tried to explain about the toxic atmosphere, the high atmospheric pressure, the extreme wind, the different gravity, and so forth, but she faded out after I talked about melted lead. She asked if they chose me because Venus is the goddess of love and beauty. I had to laugh in her face. I've always thought that they picked my name out of a hat, because I saw the list of qualified astronauts and astronets who applied and were turned down. Let's face it, I'm a little too old, a little too fat, a little too out of shape, and so forth, but I got the call, so I said okay. She asked again about the Venusian atmosphere, but she really was all about boobs and makeup, not science and astronomy, so I just excused myself and boarded EVE-1. Liftoff from the *Cosmodome* and the long trip to Venus were exciting and boring at the same time. Yes, Venus, the hottest planet in the solar system – here comes Jackie Loyd, Ph.D. and David Saia, pilot and all-around good guy.

We orbited for a while, and David pointed out how Venus counter-rotates, which I already knew, and I told him that the Venusian year is 2/3 of an Earth year, which he already knew. We read our instruments and verified the 96.5% carbon dioxide and small amounts of nitrogen and other stuff. We measured the miniscule magnetic field, and it agreed with our numbers. All that was left was to separate and de-orbit my landing module. David did a countdown, and I felt a gentle shove. Then I felt about 10 minutes of buffeting by hurricane-force winds, and finally a solid Thump! Surface wind speed was just a few miles per hour. I played the video of the descent and saw lightning on the way down, so the old observation from 2005 was proven conclusively. I couldn't talk to David – bummer. I decided to activate the auto-return program, just in case of whatever. Then I donned my suit, and carefully opened the inner hatch. I crawled to the safe-isolation zone and pulled the hatch shut, and dogged it solidly. Then I opened the outer door and looked at hell.

My swarm of microbots crawled, jumped and flew past me, heading for the surface. I just kind of pondered my options. The suit could easily take the heat, but the ground looked like moving lava, so I waited for first data from the swarm. Yep, it was hot. Yep, the atmosphere was poison. Yep, there was stuff blowing in the wind – and it was organic! Yipes!

I looked at that reading again. Organic had no business on Venus, but there were the readings, for sure. Several of the microbots shut down, and more swarmed out to take their place. I decided that I'd better do the 'one small step' thing before I lost my nerve completely. I stepped off EVE's ladder and squished onto the ground, slipping and landing on a knee – Ouch! Damn! I almost fell completely into the moving mass of movement, when I realized that it wasn't lava at all, it was mushrooms, and they were moving in some kind of dance, or pattern, or something – for sure they were moving in sync with each other. I grabbed the ladder and stood up. Now what? I tried David again, but got silence.

At first, there was like a rushing sound in my helmet, and then I realized that the sound was like when I held a conch shell to my ear, back when I was a kid. Kind of an echo, kind of what? Were they saying something? What the hell? Yes, they were speaking, for sure. I really wished I hadn't come. I looked up from the bottom of 200 miles of increasingly bad atmosphere, and beamed good thoughts to David, who was probably freaking out by now. The surface pressure here is 90 times that of Earth, and the daytime temperature is almost 900 F, but the suit was built by the South Korean company LG, so I had

lots of confidence in it. A nearby volcano was pumping lava out, but it was not a threat to my location. I could feel my bruised knee cap, but I couldn't rub it through the suit. However, I could confirm that previous reports of Venusian hell were significantly understated.

It took days of concentrated effort before I understood mushroom-speak. Dozens of microbots helped gather data and send it to the ship, and I kept manipulating the semantic filters until something interesting came out. You betcha they were communicating with me – *they were threatening me!*

They grieved that I crushed millions of their friends and relatives when I landed. They said that they weren't indigenous to Venus, and they came from the stars a long time ago. I laughed at that – it was obvious that they were just mushrooms, quite incapable of space flight. I don't trust Venusian mushrooms (they're obviously pathological liars)...But then...

I guess it was bound to happen – a few spores stuck to my suit, and when I went into EVE-1, some of them came along for the ride. (Whoops!)

And then the auto-return program kicked in and I re-bonded with David, and we returned home.

Which caused the angry Venusian mushrooms to be delivered on MY space ship.

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Well, as long as I keep this suit on, I'll be okay, but they've already consumed David and all the other humans.

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Okay, I'm really feeling icky. I've got to remove the suit and take a shower.

Very Sorry, Really,

J.L.