

If you travel near Naples, Italy, you can explore the excavation site of an ancient Roman city, destroyed almost 2,000 years ago by a volcanic eruption. In A.D. 79, Pompeii had been a thriving community located on the slope of an inactive volcano, Mount Vesuvius, near the Mediterranean Sea. Roman soldiers had guarded the city wall, as gladiators fought, merchants sold their goods, and women prepared meals.

The people of Pompeii were performing their daily routines when, all of a sudden, there was an enormous explosion within the volcano. The city became dark as a huge black cloud formed over the volcano and blocked the sunlight. Vesuvius spurted lava, stone, and ash over the city for seven days. Electric storms developed from the clouds of dust, and rain poured over the city, creating a paste of the mud and volcanic ash.

On the seventh day, carbon monoxide emerged from Vesuvius. This poisonous gas killed 15,000 of Pompeii's 20,000 citizens. The 5,000 survivors had fled the city before that fateful seventh day. The bodies of those who had remained were covered beneath twelve to fifty feet of hardened mud and ash. This cement-like mixture hermetically sealed the city. Because oxygen could not penetrate the seal, the contents of the city did not decay. The city was preserved.

The city lay buried under this protective shield undisturbed for almost 1,500 years. In 1748, a Spanish Army engineer began to excavate the city in search of treasure. He not only found treasure, but he also found Pompeii almost perfectly intact. The petrified bodies of many citizens of Pompeii were found well preserved under layers of paste.

A Roman soldier who had kept his post during the eruption was found still standing, wearing his armor. The stone-like bodies of merchants, gladiators, and priests were discovered "frozen" in action. Excavators uncovered the body of a man standing erect with a sword in his hand and his foot on a pile of gold and silver pieces. He had apparently killed five men who had tried to steal his wealth during the tragedy. Their bodies were found nearby on the floor.

Ovens contained petrified loaves of bread. Kitchen shelves held hardened nuts, raisins, and figs. Wine and olives stored in protective jugs and vats were in edible condition. Paintings retained their unfaded color. Hundreds of years after the eruption, excavators could see how the people of Pompeii had once lived.

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