

Pompeii (AD 79)

It was just a normal day in the Italian city of Pompeii. Wealthy Romans lounged in their villas. Markets, shops and bathhouses were crowded with people and the amphitheatre was full of excited spectators.



Hardly anyone noticed the first faint tremor that shook the streets at around 1 pm. However, everyone felt the next, more violent tremor and heard the thunderous blast from the volcano as a pillar of ash shot from the throat of Vesuvius. A huge cloud spread across the sky and ash fell like rain. Some people hid indoors, sure the threat would pass. Others fled, hoping they could escape the unfolding horror.

The volcano continued to erupt throughout the evening and into the night. Hard pumice stones rained down, smashing building roofs and walls.

Early the next day, a huge cloud of rock and scorching gas reached the city. A wave of heat washed over the people of Pompeii, killing them instantly. The whole of the city was slowly covered in millions of tonnes of ash, hiding Pompeii from view for nearly 2000 years.

Octavia (34 years old)

The house seemed unusually quiet without Lucius. I gave our servants their instructions for the day. I was looking forward to the evening when I would be joining my husband, the senator, and children at our holiday villa in Pompeii. As I looked over the bay, I saw what first appeared to be a cloud, heavy with rain.



Someone has angered Jupiter, I thought, and now he's about to send us a storm as punishment.

I realised quickly that the cloud was not of Jupiter's creation. As the sky grew ever darker, it was clear the cloud was not full of rain, but of a black, suffocating smoke. Vesuvius was rumbling.

I had not long since risen from my bed, but the sky was so black that it seemed like night had once again descended. In the distance, a glowing, molten river raged down the mountainside. Was that screaming I could hear? Warm particles of ash showered down.

Safe for now, I watched the fire spewing forth with growing dread. Were my husband and children safe?

Justus (13 years old)

Vesuvius seemed to be calm at last, though ash still hung in the air and covered the street. We made our way through the usually busy streets of Herculaneum, and there was hardly a soul to be seen.

‘It’s lucky we were out on the boat,’ my father said. ‘Maybe they managed to get away before it got to them.’ I wondered where the people were and what had happened to them.

I looked at the brooding silhouette of Vesuvius and feared what awaited us back home at Pompeii. How many of our few belongings had survived the eruption? Looking at the volcano in the distance, my father said he’d never seen such a landscape of devastation.

In Herculaneum, debris covered the streets, and the dusty ash made it hard to breathe. Familiar roads seemed to have disappeared. Streets that were recently filled with children’s laughter and traders’ calls were now empty and silent. I looked around for something I recognised, but saw nothing. I was afraid of what we would find at home and terrified that the devastation may not be over.



Vesuvius erupts

During

It started with a barely noticeable tremor that gently shook the streets of Pompeii. There were a few distant rumblings, like the tummy of a hungry child. The next tremor was louder and was felt by everyone in the town. Vesuvius roared like a waking lion and spat out a torrent of ash high over the town. More smoke belched into the daylight and blackened the blue sky.

The black cloud rose higher, raining dusty ash down on Pompeii. Red-hot molten rock poured from the mouth of Vesuvius and crept down its sides. Foul smelling gas mingled with the clouds of filth that poisoned the air. All the time, the drumming of rocks hitting buildings added to the mayhem and chaos of the hellish event.

After

As the smoke cleared, there was a deathly stillness over the town. Nothing stirred. Everywhere was covered by thick, grey ash – a vast dusty expanse of nothingness. Vesuvius still looked down on the town, a reminder of the power hidden inside.

