

# A DAY IN POMPEII

## History of Pompeii

The ancient ruin of Pompeii, Italy, the most famous archaeological site from classical antiquity, sits on the Bay of Naples on the southern side of Mt. Vesuvius. When Mt. Vesuvius suddenly and with virtually no warning began to erupt on the afternoon of August 24, 79 CE, the 12,000 residents of Pompeii, along with several thousand more inhabitants of the communities surrounding the long-dormant volcano, experienced a catastrophic disaster which ended in the complete loss of their city.

The volcano's eruption buried Pompeii with raining ash and pumice. The city was so thoroughly overwhelmed, it was completely abandoned as a total loss. After being forgotten for nearly 1700 years, the city was accidentally rediscovered by well-digging shepherds in 1748. Since then, its excavation has yielded extraordinary artifacts—from the rarest of art objects to the most common trinkets of daily use—and provides a comprehensive portrait of the life of a city at the height of the Roman Empire. From the moment of its rediscovery, the city has drawn curious adventurers to southern Italy; the site remains today, a popular tourist attraction and has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Much like San Diego, Pompeii was part of a beautiful coastal region that prospered in its bustling trade economy, in its nearby imperial naval harbor, and in its vacation retreats for aristocratic Romans. Its industries converted the agricultural goods of the region of Campania into exports for the whole empire: wool, olives, and grapes left the region as cloth, oil, and wine. Campanian wine and Pompeian fish sauce, in particular, were its signature exports. (See the document “Day to Day in Pompeii” for more information.)

The eruption in 79 turned the idyllic landscape into uninhabitable terrain. Superstitious respect for the dead, dangerous digging conditions, and the general scarcity of hoarded goods in the town generally deterred post-disaster looting. The site was left largely undisturbed for the remainder of the Roman Empire. With the fall of Rome, poor communications and a local feudal economy which hardly concerned itself with the rubbish of the past, the Middle Ages lost any memory of the location of Pompeii (along with the memory of other great Roman cities).

The city was rediscovered in an age before archeology was a real science, when the object of its first explorers was chiefly the recovery of precious objects for the local barons. The 18th century was experiencing a resurgence of interest in classical (Greek and Roman) art, and the pieces pulled from Pompeii and the surrounding region vastly increased Europe's familiarity with classical tastes.

In 1860, Giuseppe Fiorelli was appointed to take charge of the excavations at Pompeii. His work marks the beginning of modern archaeology at Pompeii which aimed to uncover and document the city's remains beyond its rarest art objects. Fiorelli's interest in capturing the city's botanical remains resulted in the development of a technique of making plaster casts of the remains of

plants, and later people and animals. These casts captured shapes of clothing, sandals, hair, and facial expressions in astonishing detail.

More recently, excavations have focused on the layers below the eruption of 79 CE, revealing a complex history of a site occupied by people long before Roman rule. The site was first inhabited in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE by colonial Greeks. The highly regular gridded layout to the streets and neighborhoods found in Pompeii are likely the influence of Greek city planning. The first century BCE saw the arrival at Pompeii of Roman colonists who took over the city's management and its cultural identity.

## **The Eruption**

While the people of Pompeii hadn't experienced an eruption in their lifetime, they were familiar with risks they took by living in such a geothermally active region. In 62 CE, there was a large earthquake that damaged city structures and temples. The city's architecture shows us many signs of the recovery from that disaster when they were beset by the eruption. Legend also has it that 10 days before the events of August 24, 79 CE, the wells ran dry.

Pliny the Younger has left us an invaluable eye-witness account of the eruption of Vesuvius in the form of two letters he composed for the research records of the historian Tacitus. The nephew of Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE), natural historian and Roman fleet commander, Pliny was spending that summer at his uncle's estate at Misenum.

The first of Pliny's letters records the heroic actions of his uncle. Drawn to Vesuvius to inspect the first signs of its eruption, Pliny the Elder became wrapped up in the rescue of Romans trapped at the foot of the mountain. The Elder Pliny's death in the eruption is portrayed by his nephew as the model of Roman aristocratic behavior: stoic bravery, unflinching in the face of disaster.

Pliny's second letter is a personal account of his own retreat from Misenum. It records his movement through the suffocating clouds amid the panicked, lost, and hopeless evacuees: "You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death. Many raised their hands to the gods, and even more believed that there were no gods any longer and that this was one unending night for the world."

Pliny the Elder is still remembered in vulcanology where the term *plinian* refers to a very violent eruption of a volcano marked by columns of smoke and ash extending high into the stratosphere, such as Krakatoa.

## **The People**

Pompeii was a multi-cultural seaport accessible to sailors from all over the Mediterranean. In addition to "local" Greeks, and Etruscans, Samnites, and Latins, the population would have included residents from Spain, Africa, Syria and Judea.

Of Pompeii's approximately 12,000 inhabitants, half were children. The average Pompeian woman was 4 ½ feet tall and lived to the age of 39. The average man was a few inches taller and could expect to live to the age of 41.

Contrary to depictions of the eruption in the popular imagination, most Pompeians were able to escape before the final, devastating eruption. While some bakers in town left their ovens with loaves still baking, this might represent a late-hour attempt to ready provisions for the escape. Remains of heaped goods at houses show signs of preparation for evacuation. Most of the population heeded the warnings and fled to the south, away from Vesuvius.

The remains of the approximately 1100 casualties that have been unearthed in Pompeii indicate only that a portion of the residents were too slow or unwilling to abandon the town during the first phase of the eruption and therefore fell victim to the volcano. Yet the remains of most of the victims were found crushed under collapsed roofs, awnings, and stairways, or clustered in a garden at the south end of town because they were incapable of finding the southern road out of town. Some were found in rooms where they had assumed they could weather the snow of ash.

### **Water and City Structure**

Wealthy people enriched their homes with elegant courtyard gardens decorated with frescoes of plants and flowers and an abundance of modern conveniences. Each room was heated by hot air running through cavity walls and spaces under the floors, while sophisticated hydraulic pumps provided running water.

Pompeii had a sophisticated water system. From a large reservoir, water flowed through underground pipelines into drainage systems and into aqueducts supported by arches. Water was then funneled into houses, public buildings and fountains. People outside the upper class got their water from public fountains. While Pompeii's wealthiest citizens lived in self-sustaining town houses which could provide all the necessities of a leisurely existence, Pompeii's underclass lived in single room flats.

### **Study of Pompeii**

To re-create a picture of life in Pompeii, researchers employ a range of high-tech tools. Among them are physical analysis of bones to study the physical structure of Pompeians and to determine some of the most prevalent diseases, such as arthritis, and DNA testing of bones to decipher genetic history.

With high-powered microscopes, scientists analyzed pollens, animal bones and fragments of wood, glass, plants and daily objects to figure out the natural history of the region as well as cultural and agricultural practices.

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