





Pliny the Elder described the ash cloud from erupting Vesuvius as being shaped like a stone pine tree. This one is on the walls of Pompeii. That's Vesuvius in the background. We now call eruptions that send ash tens of thousands of feet into the atmosphere "Plinian."



Pompeii was built on a low hill overlooking the port. It was buried under ash so deep, it was not rediscovered for 1700 years, even though it was on a hill and had large structures including a colosseum. The pyroclastic flows shifted the shoreline about a kilometer away.



About a third of Pompeii has not been excavated (the grassy slope), so that future generations will have something to discover – and perhaps future technology will allow better preservation of artifacts and ruins.



Excavations are ongoing in several places within Pompeii. Scaffolding helps hold up the ruins until they can be stabilized more permanently.



Vesuvius

Pompeii was buried by a day-long eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in August, 79 A.D. A rowdy seaport for far-traveling Roman sailors and traders, Pompeii is known for its numerous motels and carnal diversions. It had been inhabited for over 600 years and its residents had gotten used to minor tremors, but Vesuvius had not erupted in all that time.



Pompeii as viewed from the top of Vesuvius. The distance is about 10 kilometers.



The crater atop Vesuvius is about 250 meters deep, but because it has erupted several times since it buried Pompeii, most recently in 1944, the crater and slopes have changed since 79 A.D. Vesuvius is still active. Fumaroles still emit steam and gases (in the shadows at lower right), and one day it will erupt again.



Over 8 million people live in the danger zone near Vesuvius, including the major city of Naples shown here.



Vesuvius

Pompeii's main public forum included ornate temples and public buildings. The entire square was paved in marble. Like Herculaneum, columns here were made of brick and coated with plaster to mimic the more expensive marble columns found in the empire's capital, Rome. As a result, many columns were truncated at various heights by the pyroclastic flows.

Personal effects have largely been removed from the homes in Pompeii. Some are in museums, many are in covered storage like this. The artifacts include food and drink containers, furniture, jewelry, cookware, etc. They show us that this was a busy, populated city of over 25,000 people – including families and people just like us.





A businessman kept his money and treasures in this wood and copper chest.



This two-tier table was in someone's house. It was clad in copper, which was badly corroded by the ash and gases.



Public bath houses were a staple throughout the Roman empire. Men and women used separate facilities, which were often ornate like this one.



This large fountain in a bath house was carved from a single piece of marble and has an inlaid message touting a local business that donated it.



Some streets were off-limits to commercial vehicles (carts). These stones made sure the carts obeyed the limits. Notice the strong paving stones made of local volcanic rocks, and the excellent sidewalks. Farther down are three stepping stones that allowed pedestrians to cross the street when it was being cleaned by flowing water.



Tracks from several centuries of carts are engraved into the paving stones. The building at right is a bakery. The one at the fork in the road and the one at left were “fast food” cafés, serving warm and cool dishes for busy working people. The stone box at the fork in the road is a public water fountain.



This is a public water fountain (with a modern faucet!), where individuals could get fresh clean water and water their animals. Water was also allowed to spill over to wash the streets. The water was piped in from springs miles away. This part of the plumbing system still works!

Some multistory buildings have been reconstructed from their ruins. Overhangs protected residents from sun and rain. The street signs are modern, but many are named from signs or other evidence in ancient Pompeii.





Like most in the Roman empire at the time, the Pompeians were great supporters of the arts. This restored theater houses plays today.



Pompeii even had its own 20,000 seat colosseum, where gladiators put on spectacles.



This was the gladiator training grounds and residences. A majestic gate led them directly to the colosseum (outside the wall at left).



In Pompeii, we can walk through the ancient inhabitants' homes like this nicely reconstructed one. We can stroll through their dining rooms, bedrooms, and hallways, and see their portraits and frescoes. Imagine someone in the distant future walking through your family's home – it's quite an intimate experience.



We can wonder how many generations of this family ate together in this nicely painted dining room. Did they laugh and cry together like we do? Did families have the same kinds of ups and downs we do?



Exploring Pompeii is a very intimate, personal experience when we come across its former inhabitants. When archeologists would find a hole in the ash, they learned to fill it with plaster before excavating around it. They found hundreds of people and even some animals this way. Their bodies formed a mold in the ash, preserving them in great detail.

This man was found crouching the a corner in his house, holding a scarf around his nose and mouth.





This is a pregnant young woman. Many victims died with hands to their faces as they choked on ash and gases.



The bodies are not simple molds. Their bones are still in there. Softer parts were charred and rotted away long ago.



The ash preserved astonishing details.





This family was found all together. The mother at right is shielding her baby.

We should never forget that natural disasters like Pompeii are not about earthquakes or volcanoes, they are about **people**.