

# Pompeii

Pompeii, a village in ancient Rome, lay in the rich and fertile Campania region. This town, dedicated to Venus, was a town that believed in pleasure. Many wealthy and powerful Romans built exquisite villas there to enjoy the magnificent scenery of the countryside and the sea.

The Roman historian Livy said that its harbor was one of the finest in the world. Trade with the East, with Africa, and with other lands made many of the people of Pompeii very wealthy. Their ships brought pearls from the East for women's jewelry, fresh fish, oysters, birds and rich fruit.

With available resources from the countryside and the sea, cooking became an art in Pompeii. Goose liver pâté, mushrooms, suckling pig, fish, oysters, olives and sardines were part of the fare as were the already famous water ices and ice cream.



The town was laid out like a circle. It was about two miles (3.2 km) around. A wall with eight gates went around the city. These entry gates had Roman roads leading to each of them. (Nola gate is still in good condition.) In the center of the city was a large forum. There were several public baths, two theaters (one large one and one small one), many temples, a court for gladiators and other important buildings. The streets were made of asphalt and even today are in very good condition. Sewers concealed under the pavements led to the sea. Town houses had more than one story and often had shops along the street.

Pompeii was a prosperous and happy town. Its problem lay in its location. Pompeii was four miles (6.4 km) from the crater of Mount Vesuvius. On February 5, A.D. 63, earthquakes struck Pompeii, Naples and Herculaneum. Individual houses were destroyed; some villas were damaged but public buildings withstood the shock. Many statues were overturned and several people were found wandering about in a state of shock.

This was a forewarning of things to come. Some authorities say that the great calamity occurred in August of A.D. 79, but most historians now think it happened on November 23, A.D. 79. On that day Mount Vesuvius erupted. Lava and mud covered Herculaneum. The town and harbor were filled, but most of the people got away. Pompeii wasn't as fortunate. A great black cloud, described by Pliny the Younger, rolled across the countryside and the city like a river of death. Cinders, stones and hot ashes rained down upon the people. The very air was filled with poisonous gas. Even at dawn it was so dark that people carried lamps and torches. Buildings tottered, courtyards filled with ashes and pumice stones, great flames leaped into the sky; men, women and children shouted for each other in the terrible darkness; people hid in cellars and were buried alive; some climbed to the upper terraces thinking the lava wouldn't get that high. But eventually the ashes, cinders and lava covered up the city. Pompeii was destroyed.

Many of the people of Pompeii could have escaped. Ash and pumice fell quite slowly for some time. Had they left immediately, they might have gotten away. But many went into their homes to carry away their possessions and waited too long. Many were simply filled with panic and ran to and fro in the darkness. Farmers rushed into town and were killed by falling buildings. Many people of the city rushed into the fields and died there. Some men bravely attempted to cut their way through the lava with axes. And some people resigned themselves to death and simply lay down.

The volcano's eruption changed the area around Pompeii. For about seventeen hundred years, the city lay buried. Treasure seekers went to the area and dug tunnels to seek riches, but no important excavations were begun. Eventually, the kings of the two Sicilies hired men to excavate the area for their museum. Then archaeologists began to uncover the city block by block. They decided to keep the treasure in the city and restore it to its original condition.

What remains of two thousand bodies have now been found and over half of the city has been uncovered. If you were to go there today, you could walk through the city and see exactly how an ancient Roman city functioned.

