Why do some people choose to stay put in the face of disaster?
Nearly 2,000 years ago, a volcanic eruption destroyed the city of Pompeii. Thousands died. It was one of the worst disasters of the ancient world.

Now imagine that you were there.

**BY LAUREN TARSHIS**

It's a typical summer day in the beautiful city of Pompeii in the year 79 A.D. The main street is packed with people—women swishing by in long robes, men in tunics, children with leather sandals that slap against the hot stone streets.

Vendors shout for your attention, offering you slices of juicy melons or sizzling hunks of roasted meats. From the shoulder of a shopkeeper, a parrot squawks “salve!”—hello in Latin, the language of the Roman Empire.

You're surprised by how modern this city seems. It has a library, theaters, and grand temples. There are shops and restaurants and a market where you can taste dozens of delicacies, from sweet dates and figs to fattened roasted mice stuffed with nuts and rose petals. Beautiful marble and bronze statues stand all over the city, monuments to the famous citizens, mighty emperors, and fierce generals who built Rome into the most powerful empire in the world.
The heat makes you thirsty, so you stop at a public fountain made of carved stone. You scoop up some of the cool, clean water. No wonder Romans are proud of their water. Nowhere else in the world has such a sophisticated system of aqueducts, underground tunnels that deliver fresh water to fountains, bathhouses, and private homes.

As you rest by the fountain, an enormous man lumbers past, his arms scarred, his muscled legs thick as tree trunks. This man is a famous gladiator—a fighter set to do battle that afternoon in Pompeii’s amphitheater, a stadium that holds 20,000 people. Romans love to watch gladiators fight each other with fists, swords, clubs, or knives. Sometimes men are pitted against ferocious lions or bears. If it sounds gruesome, that’s because it is. Gladiators often die in the arena.

The Volcano

Maybe by now you’ve noticed it: the massive mountain that looms behind the city.

That’s Mount Vesuvius. You haven’t given it much thought—and neither do the people of Pompeii. Why should they? It’s just a big mountain, silent and still, its gentle slopes covered with trees and grape vineyards.

Except Mount Vesuvius is not just a mountain. It is a volcano. Vesuvius sits atop a crack in the earth’s crust—the hard, rocky layer that covers the surface of our planet like the shell of an egg. From miles below, molten rock called magma seeps up through this crack.

The people of Pompeii have no idea that a huge lake of magma is boiling under Vesuvius, steaming with poisonous, explosive gases. How could they? There is not even a word for volcano in Latin.

Vesuvius has been dormant for 1,500 years, but now it is waking up. For months, magma has been rising through the center of the volcano, filling it like fiery blood. Pressure is building.

Over the past few weeks, there have been warning signs. Talk to the farmers who tend the vineyards around Vesuvius. They’ll tell you about a stinging smell—like rotten eggs—wafting from the mountaintop. Is it a warning from the gods? Like the ancient Greeks before them, the Romans believe that gods and goddesses control everything in the world. Some say that mighty Jupiter, god of the sky, is angry at the people of Pompeii. Of course, nobody understands that the terrible smell is sulfurous gas, part of the explosive brew simmering inside Vesuvius.

There have been other signs of a coming disaster. The extreme heat underground has dried up streams. Goats and sheep are dropping dead on the mountain, their lungs seared by the poisonous gases. Most alarming of all: Small earthquakes have jolted the city, a sign of growing strain on the land.

All this is evidence that a huge eruption will come at any moment. The people of Pompeii should have evacuated days or even weeks before. But no one understands the signs.

So what are you doing standing around? You should run. Now.

The Sky Turns Black

At this point, it’s too late for the people of Pompeii . . . and it may be too late for you.
Two powerful explosions, seconds apart, shatter the sky. The ground shakes so violently that people fall. Horses and donkeys scream. Birds scatter by the thousands. You see a terrifying sight: a gigantic column of what looks like gray smoke spewing from the top of Mount Vesuvius.

It’s not smoke though. The intense heat produced by the eruption has turned millions of tons of solid rock into superheated foam. The boiling plume shoots 12 miles into the sky at rocket speeds. When it hits the freezing air in the lower atmosphere, the melted rock cools into tiny pebbles called pumice. Carried by wind, they spread through the air and pour down on Pompeii.

The pumice falls with painful force. It is mixed with hot ash, which clogs your nose and throat. Many people are fleeing. Go with them! Push past the donkey carts and get through the gates of the city. Grab the hand of a little boy who has become separated from his family. Keep moving. The farther you get, the more likely you are to live.

Other people decide to stay behind, to guard their homes and businesses. Crime is bad in Pompeii. An empty home or shop will almost certainly be ransacked by thieves. People hide in their

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**When Vesuvius erupted, Pliny the Younger was a teenager. He lived nearby in Misenum. His uncle sailed across the bay to Pompeii and died trying to rescue people. Pliny later wrote letters about that day. Here is an excerpt from one of them:**

“A Black and Dreadful Cloud”

To Cornelius Tacitus:

We stood still, in the midst of a dangerous and dreadful scene. The sea seemed to roll back upon itself. On the other side, a black and dreadful cloud, broken with rapid, zigzag flashes, revealed masses of flame. Upon this our friend said, “If your uncle be safe, he certainly wishes you may be so too; but if he perished, it was his desire, no doubt, that you might both survive him: why therefore do you delay your escape a moment?” We could never think of our own safety, we said, while we were uncertain of his.

Upon this our friend left us. Soon afterward, the cloud began to descend. My mother now urged me to make my escape, which, as I was young, I might easily do. But I refused to leave her.

Night came upon us, not such as we have when there is no moon, but that of a room when it is shut up, and all the lights put out. You might hear the shrieks of women, the screams of children, and the shouts of men; some calling for children, others for parents, others for husbands, and seeking to recognize each other by the voices that replied.

I might boast that not a sigh or expression of fear escaped me, had not my support been grounded in that miserable, though mighty consolation, that all mankind was involved in the same calamity, and that I was perishing with the world itself.

My mother and I, notwithstanding the danger that still threatened us, had no thoughts of leaving, till we could receive some news of my uncle.
homes. They think this strange storm of ash and rock will soon end.

They are wrong.

The sky turns black. As hours pass, the weight of the pumice causes roofs to collapse, trapping people in their homes.

Then more terror.

As the volcano loses energy, the molten rock and ash mix together to create a superheated wave that rushes down the mountain at 80 miles an hour. This burning avalanche is known as a pyroclastic flow. When it hits Pompeii, death for those who stayed behind is almost instant.

Over the next few hours, millions of tons of ash and rock fall on the city. In the weeks that follow, people return to Pompeii to search for survivors.

There are none.

In fact, the entire city seems to have vanished. Pompeii is buried under 12 feet of rock. Within a few decades, Pompeii is all but forgotten, wiped off the face of the Earth.

A Vanished World

You survived your day in Pompeii. You are one of the lucky few who made it far enough away from the city to escape being crushed. But before you go home, let’s take one more trip, to Pompeii today. The ruins lie near the city of Naples, in southern Italy. For nearly 1,700 years, Pompeii was forgotten. It was rediscovered in 1748 and has been studied ever since.

The layers of pumice and ash that fell on Pompeii formed a shell over the city, preserving it as a time capsule of Roman life. Archaeologists have unearthed dazzling treasures, like jewels, mosaic artwork, and statues. They even found a basket of petrified eggs and the remains of a bowl of chicken soup.

As you walk through the ruins of Pompeii, you can admire the remnants of houses, shops, and temples. You can almost hear the voices of the citizens. And you can see Mount Vesuvius. It is silent and still.

But don’t be fooled.

Vesuvius has erupted more than 80 times since Pompeii was destroyed, the last time in 1944. These eruptions were small, but scientists have no doubt that the volcano will erupt again, possibly with the same devastating force as it did in 79 A.D.

They worry about the millions who live in the eruption zone. Will they have enough warning before the next eruption? Or will people suffer the same fate as ancient Pompeiians—swallowed by fire, buried in ash, and lost to time?

And would you want to be there to find out? •

Today, Pompeii is one of Italy’s top tourist attractions. Archaeologists continue to find treasures from the past. Vesuvius looms in the background.
How Do People React?
The day Vesuvius erupted, the people of Pompeii were casually enjoying a nice day, not preparing for a disaster. How did they react before and during the eruption? Would we react differently today? Explain your answer in two to three paragraphs; use text evidence. Send it to VESUVIUS CONTEST. Five winners will get James M. Deem’s Bodies From the Ash.

Staying Put When Disaster Strikes
By Kristin Lewis

In the spring of 1980, Harry Randall Truman was advised to evacuate his home. He was the caretaker of a lodge at the base of Mount St. Helens, a volcano in the Cascade Mountains in Washington State.

For the past few months, St. Helens had been behaving strangely: Steam vented from its top; the side of the mountain bulged ominously. Earthquakes rocked the area.

Scientists warned that an eruption was imminent. Yet Truman refused to leave. The volcano was his home. He had lived there for more than half a century. “If the mountain goes, I’m going with it,” he famously told reporters.

St. Helens erupted on May 18, 1980. It killed 57 people and destroyed 250 homes, 47 bridges, and 185 miles of highway. The 2,000 people who followed evacuation orders were spared. Truman’s body was never found.

Anytime a natural disaster is predicted, whether it’s an eruption, a hurricane, or a wildfire, there are always some who refuse to leave the danger zone. For those of us watching from a safe distance, it’s easy to feel outraged, especially if emergency workers must later risk their own lives to rescue them.

Why would anyone refuse to go? In fact, there are many reasons. Some people think they will be better off among neighbors who know and care for each other; or they stay to help friends. Others believe predictions are exaggerated. People who live in hurricane-prone areas, for example, hear so many warnings year after year they sometimes become numb to even the most dire prediction.

Then there is the question of money. During Hurricane Katrina in 2005, thousands of Gulf Coast residents didn’t have the resources to just pick up and go live somewhere else. For many, staying in a hotel or relocating to another city was not an option. More than 1,800 were killed in that storm.

Another major concern is crime. A city emptied of its inhabitants is wide open for looting, so it can be tempting to tough out a disaster in order to protect one’s home or business.

And some, like Truman, simply don’t have the heart to abandon their communities.

Today, we have the science and technology to forecast when and where many natural disasters may occur. During Hurricane Sandy last October, warnings were issued days in advance, giving residents in coastal flood regions plenty of time to escape. But as history shows, leaving isn’t easy, even when the consequences of staying can be deadly.