

Enormous Eruptions

Volcanoes have fascinated and terrified people across the globe for thousands of years. Most of the time, they don't pose a threat. However, every so often they erupt and wreak devastation across the land. When this happens, some are more devastating than others. These are the top 5 most deadly volcanic eruptions ever recorded (for historical eruptions such as Mount Vesuvius, it is impossible to know how many people died).

5 Unzen (Japan) in 1792

Mount Unzen erupted in a big way in 1792. The explosion triggered an earthquake which set off the landslide. It swept through the city of Shimabara before hitting the Ariake Sea. This set off a tsunami which killed even more people. There is still evidence of the landslide today. About 15,000 people died in total.

4 Nevado del Ruiz (Colombia) in 1985

The eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in 1985 destroyed the town of Armero. Two separate explosions caused a river of mud and ash to wash down the mountain and bury it. A further mudslide also tore through the town of Chinchiná. More than 25,000 people were killed altogether.

3 Mount Pelée (Martinique) in 1902

When a volcano is showing signs of erupting nowadays, scientists are often able to warn people in time. There were no such warning systems in 1902 when Mount Pelée exploded. A break in the crater wall allegedly caused insects and snakes to flee into the town of St. Pierre, but this has never been confirmed. A giant blast tore apart the mountain and buried the town within minutes.

Most of the 30,000 people living in St. Pierre at the time died. This number was even higher than it needed to be because many people fled from the countryside. They mistakenly thought they would be safer there after the volcano erupted.

2 Krakatau (Indonesia) in 1883

One of the biggest eruptions in recorded history blew ash so high into the atmosphere that it fell over 500 miles away in Singapore. There were several explosions in total, two of which were so loud they could be heard at several points around the world. It is believed that the eruption was the loudest sound ever heard on Earth. The explosions set off a series of giant waves which engulfed the shores of Indonesia and killed over 35,000 people.

Enough dust was thrown into the atmosphere to block out the sun and lower the temperature of the Earth. Vivid red sunsets were seen as far away as New York. There is still an open vent on Krakatau that continually erupts; however, it is not considered dangerous.



Tambora (Indonesia) in 1815

Only 68 years before it would be devastated by Krakatau, Indonesia was rocked by the largest eruption ever recorded. So much ash, sulphur and other gases were thrown into the atmosphere that it blocked sunlight for months. It was nicknamed the “year without a summer”. Crops failed everywhere due to the lack of light. Places as far away as Europe and North America experienced snow in the summer. Disease was rampant, and nearly 80,000 people died from starvation and illness.



RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. How many people were living in St. Pierre?
2. How long after the eruption at Tambora was the disaster at Krakatau?
3. What was significant about the explosions at Krakatau?
4. Which was the earliest eruption?
5. What killed most people after the eruption in Tambora?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

S

Give two reasons why the number of people who died in the Mount Pelée disaster was so high.

I

Why was 1815 nicknamed the “year without a summer”?

V

Which word tells you that the vent at Krakatau never stops erupting?

V

What mental image does the phrase “engulfed the shores” give you?

P

Do you think there would be more or fewer deaths if a volcano erupted now? Why?