

Montserrat Still Nice – the Emerald Isle 30 Years after the Volcanic Eruption



18th July 1995 Soufrière Hills Volcano in Montserrat erupted. What began as a rumble in the mountains ended in 15 years of volcanic activity. Two thirds of the island covered in volcanic deposits, the capital Plymouth destroyed and over half of the population displaced. 30 years later, on the same day as the first explosion, I am on the island amongst Montserratians, politicians, scientists, policy makers and more. This article traces memory to hope, as a once frozen island looks to the future.

Getting there: An Unusual Affair



Departing from Antigua, my first glimpse of Montserrat is from a tiny 8-seat 1960s airplane. We're seated based on weight, and I am lucky enough to be close enough to the pilot to watch him flick the switches in-flight, turning the engine off to prepare for landing. This is the only way to reach the island; the ferry having stopped years ago when tourism levels collapsed. Perhaps the first image that

comes to mind of a volcanic island is a moonscape of grey-pocketed rock. But floating up high I was struck by the lush, verdant and rolling hills. I brace myself as the plane dipped and dived in the turbulence as land met sea, but nevertheless a smooth landing into John Osborune Airport, nestled in a valley to the North of the island. The air is warm and slightly salty.

Remembering the Eruption: Music, Song and Creativity

Although Montserrat has materially changed, the spirit remains strong. Music, song and dance have long been at the heart of Montserrat. In the 1980s a thriving community of local and international artists spent their creativity on the island. From Paul McCartney to Elton John, Boy George, the Police, Duran Duran and Arrow Castell. Apart from the isolated beauty of the island, a local tells me that Montserrat was so popular as even the most famous artist was treated as any other person. Although Air Studios, the main recording station owned by George Martin, was lost to the eruption there are still hints to this past across the island.



Paul McCartney's handprints at Montserrat Cultural Centre.



Sign for Penny Lane, a nod to the Beatles presence on the island.

On my first evening I was immersed into the story of the volcano; life on the island before, during and after, through a series of songs by the Emerald Community Singers. Life changed quickly and from this, music and lyrical creativity burgeoned as a way of tracing and understanding the different challenges faced over the last 30 years. Numbers included 'Fire up a Mountain' (Oriole String Band) and 'I Don't Know' (Jimmy Buffet) illustrating the fear and uncertainty in the initial eruptive stages. 'Shovelling' and 'Woman In A Shelter Bawling' (Randy Greenway) reflecting on the community ash clear up effort and the difficulties of shelter life during the eruption. Followed by 'Keep The Faith' (Tanty Johnson and Randy Greenway) and 'Through It All' (Andrae Crouch) which look to faith as a source of strength. Often the music calls to Montserratians that left to the island to live abroad. In the words of Pat Belonger Ryan *'Still home still nice/ It's paradise with a touch of ash/ No matter where in the world you roam/ Montserrat is home sweet home'*.



The extent of the catastrophic eruption is enough to completely shake any community, and the strength of Montserratians is incredibly inspiring. However, I noticed that the word ‘resilient’ was not a word many community members favoured. One local tells me because being resilient and strong in adversity was just something that their community had to do; there was no choice but to keep going. Further there is a sense now as much as the eruptive period continues to be celebrated and remembered through many ways including song, there is a drive to look forward to the future of Montserrat as a thriving nation no longer in the shadow of the volcano.

Into the Exclusion Zone: Zone V



Although engulfed in volcanic material, the former capital Plymouth still stands.

Volcanic eruptions can happen with little warning. Entry into Zone V is permitted only with a tour guide that has explicit permission from the government. Beyond the border, across the Belham River Valley, lies the buried town of Plymouth. Montserrat is often termed the ‘Pompeii of the Caribbean’, and it quickly became obvious why. Lives had been frozen in time – through shattered windows I caught glimpses of dining tables that remained in family kitchens, shoes still for sale on the shelves of Wyke House and a chalkboard at the back of the old school building. A fellow visitor on the tour, now living abroad, recalls how she used to line up for school outside the building. Frozen, but buried under metres of ash and volcanic deposits, it felt almost too intimate to look for too long into windows.



Home just on the edge of the exclusion zone.



Top floor of a four-storey building.

Whilst homes are still tended to in the hope residents may one day return, and some even still paying mortgages on homes that can't be inhabited, other homes have disappeared. The building pictured top right, once just a few tens of meters from the sea is now set back over a hundred meters as volcanic deposits have formed new land. It may look like much of the building is still standing, but this is just the top floor of four. Just past this point, lies the old port, and the minibus can go no further. Stepping out, the air is pungent with an eggy whiff of the sulphur that is constantly spewing from the volcano's mouth. The black volcanic sand beach is washed over by waves of crystal-clear azure water.

Volcanoes are often described as sublime, and I could not help but coming back to the word. The Soufrière Hills Volcano is grand, when it chose to etch out a new landscape it was unstoppable and its impact lives on far beyond active eruption. Yet for the peoples who lives so quickly became forever altered, it's hard to imagine what it was like to lose everything overnight.



Volcanic beach in the exclusion zone with views of Soufriere Hills Volcano.

To Montserrat and Back

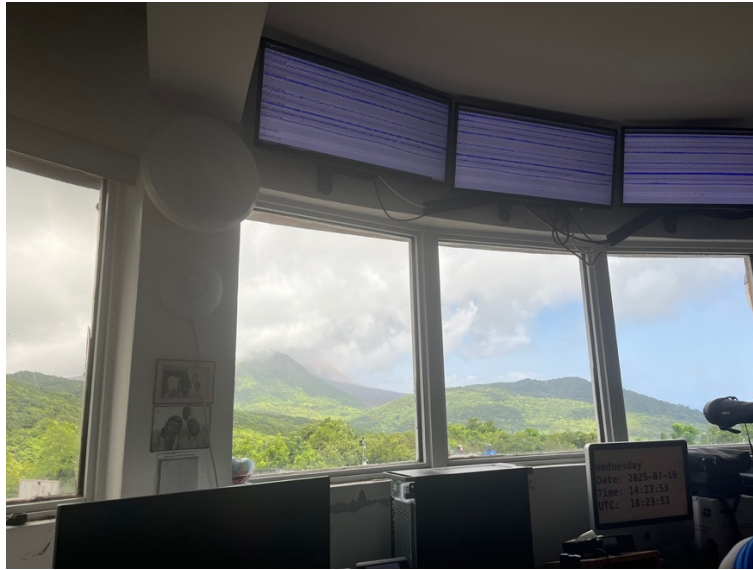
The Montserratian community stretches beyond seas and borders. As part of my trip, I was fortunate enough to attend the Soufrière Hills Volcano 30 Years on Conference. Whilst it was my first time on the island, for many attendees they first flew out to Montserrat in the late 1990s during the crisis.

Soufrière Hills Volcano was not known to be active; there was no volcano observatory at the time.

The island needed expertise and so scientists, politicians and disaster management specialists alike arrived on the island within days to support the response. Many responders came from neighbouring Caribbean countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, and a significant proportion from the UK as

Montserrat is a British Overseas Territory.

The conference is not quite what one would expect: lots of scientists with highly technical presentations. No doubt I learnt far more about the specificities and chemical composition of volcanic rocks than ever before. But more than that this conference was a celebration of community, people and progress. Any volcanologist will tell you they are as much physical scientists as social scientists. Responding to a volcanic eruption is not just understanding the physical processes of a volcano, but how to communicate uncertainty in a time of crisis, build trust with local communities and support effective disaster management that meets the people's needs. The conference reflected this by giving space to share memories and stories and bring back together those that responded first-hand to the crisis.



View from Montserrat Volcano Observatory today.

Looking forward

As I reflect on my time in Montserrat, what stands out most is an outlook that is focused on moving forward. A people that are about putting Montserrat back on the map as a tourist destination, an economy full of potential and a place to call home even when away from home. Thirty years after the eruption, Soufrière Hills Volcano has left a mark, but the spirit of Montserrat is unchanged.