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Living on a Volcano

Just before 2 a.m. on January 23, 1973 an eruption began along a 1.600-meter-long fissure on the island of Heimaey just off the south-west coast of Iceland. The eruption was unexpected and without warning, the first since 3.000 BC, and it changed forever the lives of the islands 5.300 inhabitants.

Within hours of the eruption, the volcano had disgorged a column of acrid smoke 6,000 meters into the atmosphere and red hot lava flowed into the town, engulfing all before it.

Still buried under the volcanic residue are some of the houses, furniture and possessions of those who returned. Some houses, small sections of their roofs poking eerily above the lava, serve as poignant memory joggers. All in all, one-third of the town was destroyed and another 20% of it badly damaged.

“The memories are there all the time, you can’t get away from them,” says photographer Sigurgeir Jónasson. “The chances of a repeat occurrence are probably quite small, but you can’t help wondering if she’ll blow again.”

Subconsciously, wondering is now a part of life for the islanders, although few of them show it. Life is for living, not worrying. “You know, we Icelanders have to deal with the elements on a daily basis. We lose people every year in winter storms both on land and at sea, so in a sense we are better equipped to deal with a disaster of this kind,” said Jónasson.

“It’s not quite such a shock to us. I think people elsewhere are rather more horrified, but then we would probably be more shocked by, say, the number of murders in London or New York.

“For our part, we have to live in conjunction with nature, not in opposition to it.” But a large chunk of Heimaey is deserted now, the blackened lava a constant reminder of that awful morning 23 years ago.

First settled

more than 1,100 years ago, Heimaey is one of 15 very small islands that make up the Westman Island group. It is the only one that is inhabited, and is less than three hours by ferry to the fishing village of fírlákshöfn on the mainland.

The islanders lived by catching fish and birds, collecting eggs and farming – including raising sheep.

Theirs was a hard, but tranquil, undisturbed life – apart from one historical hiccup in 1627 when Moroccan pirates invaded the island killing 36 people and taking 242 into bondage. Another 200 escaped this fate by hiding in caves or climbing sheer cliffs. “After that people lived life in peace,” said islander Björn Ólafsson, “until the eruption.”

Successfully, too, if recent figures are anything to go by. Whereas in 1840 there were only 354 inhabitants, by 1930 this had increased to 3,350, and on eruption night the population had reached 5,300. This was 2.5% of Iceland’s population, but this 2.5% accounted for over 11% of the country’s total fish-catch value. Life was good on Heimaey.

That all changed

for a while, minutes after the eruption to the east of town, island police had galvanized themselves into action and were evacuating the town’s residents.

Fortunately, the entire fishing fleet of about 100 vessels



was in harbor owing to a force-12 storm. Fortunately, it had subsided and the first boatload of people left harbor at 2:30 a.m., little more than half-an-hour after the hillside had exploded into flames.

The townspeople gathered at the quayside, calmly waiting for their turn to board the boats. By early morning everyone going to the mainland had left. Miraculously there were no casualties.

Ernst Kettler, who made an award-winning film of the eruption, takes up the story: "My parents-in-law were woken by the eruption, but at first my father-in-law refused to leave his house, let alone the island.

"It was a combination of not really believing that any harm would come to him, and not wanting to desert his home. My mother-in-law was not of the same opinion, and coerced by her and family friends he finally consented to leave."

On the mainland, Iceland's Civil Defense Committee had organized coaches and city buses to take the evacuees to Reykjavík, and hour's drive away. Aid came from abroad, particularly from the other Nordic countries.

With the exception of 200 or so emergency workers who remained on Heimaey, the 5,100 evacuees stayed on the mainland for several months, the fishermen basing their boats at other harbors.

The eruption rumbled on for four months. The entire town was thick with lava and ash. In all, the newly formed volcano Eldfell spewed 200 million tons, or 240 million cubic meters, of lava and ash across the island.

Four hundred houses,

one-third of the total, were damaged beyond repair. Colossal damage was done to public utilities, roads, automobiles, businesses, and personal property, and many lives were put on hold.

Ólafur Jónsson had just finished renovating a house built in 1911, and had moved in on the Saturday before the eruption. "We went to the mainland the first night, but I returned the next evening. I never believed our house was in any real danger," said Ólafur.

"But on Thursday a red-hot chunk of lava crashed through a window and moments later the entire house was ablaze. I phoned my wife and told her that the house was gutted and that I planned to rebuild again, no question about it. She thought I was nuts! But I rebuilt it.

Jónsson and his wife lost all their personal belongings: clothes, books, diaries, jewelry, all the bric-a-brac of life that marks a human being as an individual. Yet he refused to worry or allow himself to be too upset.

"Living through that we did changes the way one looks at things. Wordly possessions became much less important. I promised myself to live differently in future, but that changed with time," he confesses with a smile. "Now I'm back on the same old tracks again."

Immediately after the eruption, emergency workers, despite the dangers from lava, debris and gas, began removing those possessions they could reach to safer areas of the town, or shipping them to the mainland.

About 2,500 tons of frozen and salted fish were shipped out, as were sheep, horses and chickens. Cows were slaughtered. Ash was shoveled off roofs to keep them from caving in, and windows boarded up.

About one-third

of the population did not return to Heimaey, mostly because of financial loss or housing difficulties. A few simply didn't relish the idea of living on top of a volcano. Björn Ólafsson was more philosophical about it.

"Most of us live on some sort of volcano. Dangers are everywhere. Most people pick their own set of dangers and just go on living," he commented.

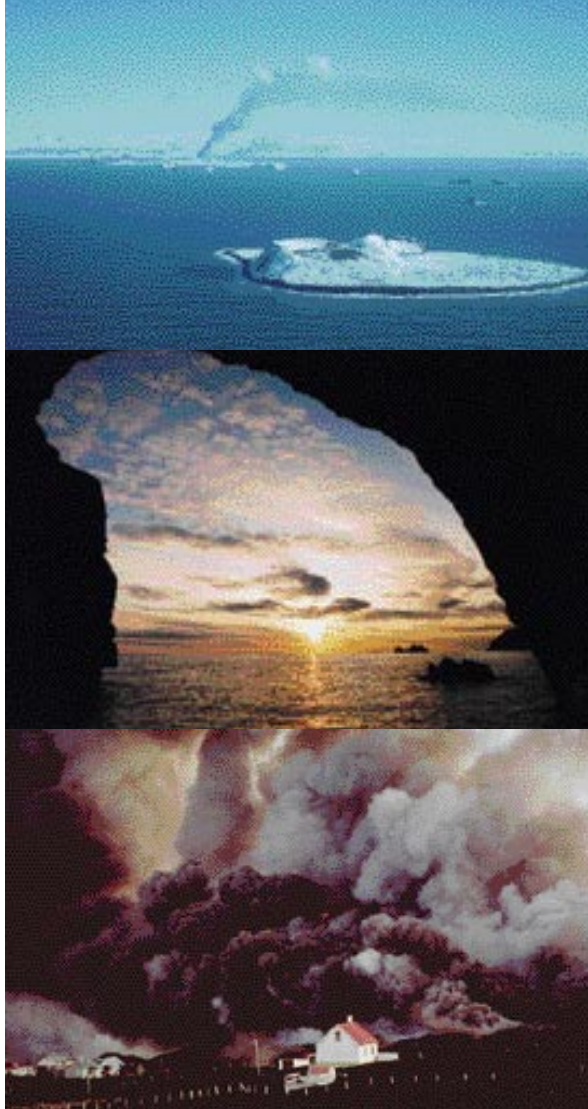
"Icelanders have for centuries faced the elements, worked with them, and bent when necessary. If you don't bend when dealing with natural forces, you break. And, anyway, as it was the first eruption in 5,000 years, the odds on another one spouting off are extremely slim."

Ernst Kettler has a similar view. "Why did people go back? The question should really be: Why not? That's where they lived and worked isn't it? Most of the people returned," said Ernst.

"My father-in-law went back as soon as he could, to the dismay of his wife who wanted to stay on the mainland. But then he was born on Heimaey and she wasn't. I suppose if you grow up with something it isn't so frightening."

A brave view, given that volcanic eruptions are more frequent in and around Iceland than any other part of the world, except Hawaii, with an average of one every five years.

One of the most spectacular was in November 1963 when an underwater eruption 20 km southwest of



Fotos: Guðmundur Sigfússon Vestmannaeyjum

Heimaey deposited one million cubic meters of lava on the seabed and formed the island of Surtsey, nearly three kilometers square and rising to 173 meters above sea level.

Originally,

Heimaey measured 11.3 square km. Four months later, the volcano had added another 2.2 square km. Only luck and hard work prevented the expanding island from filling in the harbor.

“If that had happened the future of Heimaey would have been very uncertain,” Ólafsson said. “When pumps were set up to face the lava flow in an attempt to divert the stream, it was a community of people doing everything possible to save their homes.”

All available pumps in Iceland were flown to the island, including several powerful ones brought in from the United States. Altogether, 1,200 liters of water were sprayed onto the encroaching lava every second.

In the end the harbor was saved. As if in reward for their efforts, it had become much safer too: the lava had formed a natural jetty to the east, ending the island fishermen’s 1,000-year-old battle with southeast gales when entering the harbor.

Not until July 3 was the eruption officially declared over. It was time

for cleaning and rebuilding. The islanders began returning home, and when school opened in September, 186 students reported for classes. By the New Year, 300 students had registered for the Spring semester and the island’s population had climbed to 2,000. Before long business was almost back to normal, although it would be many years of hard work before Heimaey recovered fully.

Today, the population is 4,800, close to that of “Eruption night,” and the fishermen’s catch-value figures are better than ever. Tourism has also increased since 1973, with about 40,000 travelers yearly making their way by air or ferry to explore living remains of that dramatic night, as well as to enjoy what Heimaey was always offered – an enchanting environment as a backdrop for a peacefully exciting lifestyle.

Of course, there remains an element of danger, of another unexpected eruption, but then there are no guarantees in this life, neither in the city nor in the country. But life is good on Heimaey

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On a trip to Vestmannaeyjar (Vestman-Islands) you can discover the cultural history of the islands in a special Museum-Centre placed in the middle of the town. It is divided into three departments: Historical-Museum, Art-Museum and a library.

The Historical-Museum tells us everything about the culture and livelihood of the Islands throughout the time. It has a special coverage about the volcanic eruption in 1973.

In the Art-Museum you can always find a permanent exhibition of the works of the finest artists of the islands. The Art-Museum regularly introduces some big names in the history of Icelandic art, such as Jóhannes Kjarval.

After a visit to the museums you should drop by at the library which is in the same house.

Near to the harbour we can find Skansinn which is the oldest inhabited area in the town. It is now a part of the Historical-Museum and an officially protected archaeological and historical site. It keeps few very remarkable structures such as a fortress from the 17th century, Landlyst which is the oldest dwelling house in the town and a very old stave-church specially given from Norway to Iceland.

Another interesting museum is the aquarium- and national history museum of Vestman-Islands. It keeps a permanent exhibition about bird- and fishing breeds living around Iceland. □