

# Unveiling the Faces of Death in Campania, Italy

by Hee En Qi (143258)

The warm Mediterranean spring breeze welcomed me as I made my way to the train station. It was seven in the morning, yet the streets had already sprung to life. A young man in a black leather jacket carried a tray full of coffee with one hand while maneuvering his scooter down the narrow street with the other. An elderly lady lowered an empty basket from her balcony on the third floor to the ground, waiting patiently to receive her groceries from the grocer. Several middle-aged people in their business suits stood around a coffee bar, taking their sweet time enjoying their daily dose of espresso before getting to work. "La Dolce Vita", the sweet life, is truly lived up by the locals in Naples, Italy.

Overseeing Naples is an active volcano, Mount Vesuvius. It stands 1,280 metres tall on the Bay of Naples, looking mighty and serene. Behind its calmness was yet a bloody history. It rose to fame for its eruption in the A.D. 79, in which it wiped out the urban areas of Pompeii and Herculaneum and took thousands of lives. It was my first destination of the day, as I was, ironically, curious about the culprit behind such a catastrophic event. I hopped on the Circumvesuviana train—which was late as usual—from the Piazza Garibaldi station and enjoyed a scenic 40-minute journey to the Ercolano Scavi station. At the train station, there are various travel companies that provide bus service to Mount Vesuvius. I opted for Sitabus, as it was one of the cheapest options, costing only 10 Euros round trip.



Image by De Mi Ser, Flickr





The bus took me to the trail No. 5 on Mount Vesuvius. It only takes a short 15-minute walk to get to the crater from there. As I made my way to the summit, a faint smell of sulphur tickled my nostrils, and a splendid view of the dense metropolitan area by the Mediterranean Sea came into sight. At the peak of the mountain was a 305-metre-deep cone, known as the Gran Cono. Thin gusts of steam rose from its dark-grey crater wall, which came off as both majestic and unnerving at the same time. The volcano is believed to be overdue for an eruption, prompting the Vesuvius Observatory to monitor its seismic activity continuously and the authorities to develop evacuation plans. Sitting atop of a 400km<sup>2</sup> wide magma reservoir, the active volcano threatens the lives of 800,000 people in the 25 communes nearby and part of the city of Naples. Gazing at the habited areas from the top, the thought of these places being covered in volcanic ash someday in the future sent a chill down my spine. With that in mind, I went onto my next stop where the doomed fate had once befallen—the Herculaneum Archaeological Site.

The Herculaneum Archaeological Site is located at the bottom of Mount Vesuvius. In

the A.D. 79, the ancient Roman town, Ercolano, was believed to be hit by a pyroclastic flow 12 hours after Mount Vesuvius first erupted and destroyed Pompeii. At that time, when the volcano eruption stopped momentarily, the habitants believed that they were no longer in danger and returned to their homes. Little did they know that they would be killed by blazing gas the next morning. Since then, Herculaneum was left forgotten under a 25-metre-thick layer of mud until its fragments were first uncovered in 1709.

Walking on the undestroyed ancient Roman path at the archaeological site, you would be surprised that the buildings remain miraculously intact. Some were still covered with sturdy roofs. Untold stories were sealed within the well-preserved wall decorations and mosaic, leaving space for visitors to fill the stories with their imagination. Skeletons of the victims could be seen scattering around in the boat sheds. It was said that the victims intended to seek shelter there, but the extreme heat baked their bodies and took their lives instantly. One of the skeletons was discovered with a precious ring on her finger. Apparently, death spared no one, regardless of their social status at the time.



After spending 2 hours at the Herculaneum Archaeological site, I grabbed a *montanara* pizza—Neapolitan deep-fried pizza dough baked with marinara sauce—at a trattoria and took the Circumvesuviana train again to the next stop—Pompeii. Despite the crowd at the ticketing office, pre-booking was not necessary as the line moved rather quickly. Audio guides were available at the counter, but I personally preferred Rick Steve’s free audio guide available online. Be prepared to spend around 5 hours here, as the Pompeii archaeological site is larger than that of Herculaneum. A bottle of water and a pair of sunglasses would always come in handy especially in the summer, as the ruins in Pompeii barely provide any shades.

Stepping into the archaeological site, I noticed that the buildings in Pompeii turned out to be less preserved than those in Herculaneum immediately. It is said that Pompeii was showered by volcanic debris directly when the volcano erupted, tearing the buildings down. The Forum, located in the 7th Region, used to be Pompeii’s centre of life where political and cultural activities take place. However, only thick, short columns remained on the ground, standing silently under the bright clear sky, breathing softly after going through a catastrophic destruction. On the border of the forum stood a well-preserved bronze statue, which seemed to be watching the recovery of Pompeii over the past thousand years quietly. Exquisite frescos could be found in the Villa of the Mysteries that is located slightly further away from the 9th region. Experts interpreted these ancient Roman murals to be illustrating an initiation of a young woman into a mystery cult, but nobody would ever know the whole picture other than the ones who once lived here thousand years ago.

Plaster casts of the victims can also be found in the archaeological site. These casts are made from the voids in the layers of hardened pumice and ash. When clouds of hot gases asphyxiated and took the lives of 2,000 Pompeiians in the 79 A.D., these hardened pumice and ash captured the last moments of the victims like poignant photographs of eternity. Some of the casts were embracing one another, some were curling themselves up as if they were embracing death, while some were lying openly as if death caught them off guard. As I finished the audio guide, I stood still at the

Amphitheatre of Pompeii and played Bastille’s Pompeii. “But if you close your eyes, does it almost feel like nothing has changed at all?” I couldn’t help but wonder what ran through the victims’ minds when the walls were tumbling down. Did they choose to shut their eyes, telling themselves that everything would be fine, as their stories got sealed by ashes and rubbles? Were they angered for their humane vulnerability against the cruelty of nature?

I walked out of the archaeological park as the sun set, shining its last gleam on the city of Pompeii. I took a deep breath, trying to recollect myself as if I had just transcended from a time machine. Unveiling this part of bitter history turned out to be rather emotional and led me—I’d say any other visitor as well—to rethink about life. As I made my way back to the train station, I couldn’t wait to get back to the lively streets of Naples and have another authentic Margherita Pizza before the city, to my crazy imagination, turns into a new archaeological site.

