

Montserrat's Soufriere Hills Volcano - Prime Tourism Attraction

Montserrat offers a very rare opportunity to witness an active volcano from a safe distance. After laying dormant since prehistoric times (pre-1632 for Montserrat), the Soufrière Hills Volcano in the southern part of the island began erupting on 18 July 1995 with a phreatic explosion (steam and ash) following a 3 year period of seismic (earthquake) activity which began in 1992.



The first large event occurred in August 1995 blanketing Plymouth in a thick ash cloud which brought almost complete darkness for about 15 minutes. Shortly afterwards the first evacuation of southern Montserrat was initiated. Plymouth itself was finally abandoned the following year. It now lies buried under layers of volcanic debris deposited by pyroclastic activity and mudflows - each time it rains here in the Emerald Isle, a little more of the former capital disappears forever. 1997 is probably uppermost in people's minds when they recall the eruption to date, and saw pyroclastic flows and surges sweep down the north-eastern flanks of the volcano causing the abandonment of the W H Bramble Airport. By this time more than half of Montserrat's inhabitants had been moved away after their homes and businesses were destroyed and the island's tourism industry was also adversely affected.

Since then an Exclusion Zone encompassing the Soufrière Hills Volcano has been in place and life has refocused to the north. Montserrat's tourist industry is now undergoing a revival, with the volcano representing one of the island's most unique and popular draws. Visitors can learn about its geological origins and history as well as view the volcano from safe locations around the island.

Whilst the volcanic Exclusion Zone covers the entire south-eastern half of the island, as well as extending four kilometres off-shore along the eastern coast to what is known as the Maritime Exclusion Zone, there are various vantage points from where it is possible to view the volcano and

the destruction it has wrought on the island.

Volcano Viewing

Possible from safe vantage points including Jack Boy Hill, and the Montserrat Volcano Observatory (MVO). Another recommended vantage point for viewing Plymouth and surrounding areas is from Garibaldi Hill although this requires a four-wheel drive vehicle or a steep climb to appreciate the view from the summit.



Plymouth - A Modern-day Pompeii

Abandoned in 1997, Montserrat's capital Plymouth has been compared to a modern day Pompeii. Buried deep in ash and volcanic debris including boulders up to the size of the houses that once stood there, the once thriving business and commercial centre of the island now resembles a dust-covered lunar landscape through which deep canyons have been gouged. Plymouth lies within the volcanic exclusion zone and access is currently not possible. Nevertheless, the devastation of Plymouth can be safely viewed from Garibaldi Hill or on an island boat tour. These boat tours begin from the port in Little Bay and head south, first to Plymouth, then round the southern tip of Montserrat to the Tar River Delta and north to the remnants of WH Bramble Airport. From the sea, you can clearly see the path taken by the pyroclastic flows and mudflows with the Soufrière Hills.

Garibaldi Hill

Garibaldi Hill provides a contrasting view of the lush greenery of Salem, Old Towne and surrounding areas and a bird's eye view of the grey buried Capital, Plymouth and other areas in the South.

During heavy rainfall or high volcanic activities visitors are advised not to cross Belham Valley that leads to Garibaldi Hill.



Jack Boy Hill

In the north east of the island is a viewing facility at Jack Boy Hill, which also provides an excellent vantage point for volcano viewing. This facility overlooks the destroyed WH Bramble Airport, the old estate house, the site of destroyed eastern villages, now covered by volcanic pyroclastic flows and of course the volcano. The facility includes a viewing platform, picnic areas, a viewing telescope, a mini trail and landscaped grounds.

Montserrat Volcano Observatory

The Soufrière Hills Volcano is constantly monitored by the Montserrat Volcano Observatory (MVO) in Flemmings. As well as monitoring the volcanic activity, the MVO provides information on the volcano to the general public. The MVO Interpretation Centre (recently established) is opened Monday to Thursday from 10:15am to 3:00pm. There are poster displays explaining the techniques used in monitoring seismic (earthquake) activity, gas emissions, ground deformation and environmental impacts; and dramatic video shows including a synopsis of the activity and examples of the recent events on the volcano, along with touch screen kiosks and volcanic artifacts on display. Further information on the MVO, along with up-to-date activity reports on the Soufrière Hills Volcano and explanations of volcanic phenomena, can be found at Mvo.ms.

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