

The piton de la Fournaise (Réunion: an eruption almost every year!)

The piton de la Fournaise, located on the island of the Réunion, in the Indian Ocean, is the most active French volcano: it erupts approximately once a year! However, it is not the most dangerous, because these eruptions are rather "quiet".

In April 2007, the piton de la Fournaise had a particularly intense eruption. For several months, some cracks had appeared at the top, causing mini-earthquakes and lava to escape. On 2nd April, at 10 o'clock in the morning, the eruption itself began with a crack which appeared at low altitude, emitting spectacular fountains of lava: the melted rock, at very high temperature (more than 1 000 °C), was ejected more than 100 meters high.

The inhabitants of the village of Tremblet feared that the lava would flow towards them, but were quickly reassured: the flow took another direction (a few days later, they were evacuated in preparation for a new flow, but, yet again, it was a false alarm). This extremely fluid lava descended the slopes of the volcano and advanced sometimes at 60 km/h.

The highway (RN2) was cut off for over more than 1 km... covered in places by 40 meter thick lava. Upon reaching the ocean, the lava solidified and formed a platform of more than 200 m wide, thus increasing the island of the Reunion by 45 hectares.

The eruption, which continued until the 28th April, did cause any deaths, only some casualties, in particular teenagers hospitalized because of toxic gases emitted by the volcano.

Mount Saint Helens (United States, an devastating eruption in 1980)

Mount Saint Helens, in the United States, was called "the mountain of fire" by the Indians. It had a devastating explosion on 18th May 1980.

After more than a century of inactivity, on 27th March 1980, Mount Saint Helens awoke: a column of smoke escaped from the top. A small crater was formed, some explosions of ashes and vapour started on 22nd April, while small earthquakes were recorded. This phenomenon, which was repeated over several days, attracted the curious, while at the same time the authorities ordered evacuation. About sixty people, wanting at all costs to closely observe the birth of a new eruption, paid for it with their lives.

On the 18th May 1980, at 8:32, Mount Saint Helens erupted violently. Within a few seconds, the whole northern side of the volcano exploded in an enormous ash cloud. A rock avalanche descended the steep slopes at nearly 250 km/h. The volcano was decapitated: its altitude went from 2 950 meters to 2 549 meters in an instant, leaving an immense crater in the shape of a horseshoe.

The quantity of ashes was such that cities located within 150 km of the volcano were plunged into darkness. Millions of trees laid on the ground, knocked down by the shock wave (in places, the winds exceeded 1 000 km/h!) and carbonized by the pyroclastic surge formed from the volcanic ashes, dust and burning gases. In addition, the intense heat released by the eruption dissolved snow present at the top of the volcano. This water, mixed with ash, caused large mudslides, the lahars, which completed the destruction.

The eruption, which lasted 9 hours, was very spectacular but had caused only a few deaths, because of the evacuation measures which had been taken.