



## Central America and the Caribbean Islands

### GEOGRAPHY

# Montserrat: Living Under the Volcano

*Soufriere Hills, a volcano in the south of Montserrat, ended almost four centuries of inactivity in July 1995, when it began a series of eruptions that turned life on this small Caribbean island upside down. Events on Montserrat show how human experience, which is measured in decades, can be shaped by forces of nature that occur over centuries, or even millennia. A journalist who visited Montserrat in 1997, during the second year of the ordeal, filed this report.*

Gerard Dyer was harvesting his crops, a normal enough pursuit on a cloudless April morning on Montserrat. Half a mile above him, however, at the top of a peak . . . steam curled from fissures in a dome of gray rock. . . . Moving from patch to patch on ten sloping acres, he hoed sweet potatoes from long mounds of earth, pulled up carrots, picked parsley and tarragon. Satisfied that he'd taken enough, he loaded the produce into a battered pickup truck parked by the dirt track that led to the main road—our only escape from Soufriere Hills Volcano.

On Montserrat these days there's no telling when a quick exit might be needed. . . . Eruptions . . . have forced . . . evacuations of thousands of people from the south to community centers, churches, and schools in the sparsely populated northern hills. Families there have taken in relatives and friends, filling bedrooms to overflowing; foreign property owners have rented their vacation villas to locals who can afford the double burden of rent and mortgage payments on their [abandoned] houses. . . .

Evacuees are prohibited from occupying their homes and businesses in the south, designated as an unsafe zone. Some 4,000 Montserratians—one-third of the population—have abandoned their erstwhile [one-time] paradise, most emigrating to other Caribbean islands. Others have gone to Great Britain, which still holds the 39-square-mile island as a dependent territory.

Who can blame them? . . . Hotels and restaurants closed down. Cruise ships skirted the island. . . . Unemployment rose from 7 to 50 percent. . . . Plymouth, the capital and only place of any size, with a pre-eruption population of 4,000, became a ghost town; it lies well within the unsafe zone, three miles west of the volcano. "The lifeblood of the country was there," said Midge Kocen, who helps run Montserrat's media center. "All the government offices and utilities, most of the shops and petrol [gas] stations, the post office, the cinema, the public market. . . ."

When the mountain [is] judged quiet enough, people [can] get passes to visit the unsafe zone, which is how Gerard came to be working on the flanks [sides] of Soufriere Hills that bright morning. "If you have animals and crops, you can't just leave them," said Gerard. . . . "You have to come

look after them and hope nothing happens.” As he spoke, the volcano made a crackling sound like distant thunder—blocks of solid lava rolling down the side of the dome. . . . As long as Gerard can plant and harvest his crops, the Dyers will get by. But there’s always worry. “We’re afraid they’ll stop giving passes for us to get to our fields. I don’t know what we’ll do then.” . . .

Minutes before midnight on September 17, 1996, the volcano ratcheted up [increased] the action. Part of the dome collapsed, and rock shot sideways out of the crater. Charged ash particles sparked lightning, thunder boomed, and for the first time pebbles pounded the southern end of the safe zone. Terrified, people in villages in the line of fire . . . ran barefoot from their beds to their cars to escape the volcanic hail. . . . “It sounded like a war,” recalled a man whose car windshield was smashed by the debris. “It could have been artillery shells falling around the house.” . . .

“I’m never turning my back on that volcano again,” said Gertrude Shotte, a teacher. . . . “I was one of the ones who spent the night in a car by the side of the road after those stones started to fall. We’re getting the idea that this thing really can blow and affect us all.” . . .

Most likely the volcano will go on throwing out ash and stones for years without making the island uninhabitable. Acting on this expectation, the government began the task of shifting human activity out of danger. Public services, roads, and utilities, all centered around Plymouth, are being reestablished in the north. . . . “The north of the island has not been affected by a volcano in two million years, so we’ve based all our contingency [back up] plans on that,” Frank Savage, Britain’s governor on Montserrat, told me. . . . “We have to have faith in the scientific advice and hope to God they’ve got it right.”

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**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How has the Soufriere Hills volcano affected population distribution and settlement patterns on the island of Montserrat?

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2. In what ways has the volcano’s eruption affected the daily lives of Montserratians?

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**Activity**

Check on the status of Montserrat’s volcano and people today. Summarize your findings in a short report.