

Case Study: Montserrat

The Soufrière volcano on Montserrat is a well-used example of the effects of a volcano in a LIC. It is over 15 years since the main eruption in 1997 in which 19 people died. The capital city, Plymouth, was abandoned, and became a modern-day

Pompeii. Much of the southern third of the island became an exclusion zone (Figure 9.45). So how have things changed since 1997?





Figure 9.45 Plymouth and Soufrière, Montserrat

By 2002, Montserrat was experiencing something of a boom. The population, which had dropped in size from over 11 000 before the eruption to less than 4000 in 1999, had risen to over 8000. The reason was very clear. There were many jobs available on the island. There were many new buildings, including new government buildings, a renovated theatre, new primary schools and lots of new housing in the north of the island. There was even a new football pitch and stadium built at Blakes Estate (Figure 9.46). There were plans to build a new medical school and a school for hazard studies. To date, these have not been built.



Figure 9.46 Montserrat football pitch

However, by the summer of 2009 it was very clear that conditions on Montserrat had changed. The population had fallen to a little over 5200. There are two main reasons for this. The first is the relative lack of jobs. Although there was an economic boom in the early 2000s, once the new buildings were built many of the jobs disappeared. There are still plans to redevelop the island – a new urban centre and a new port are being built at Little Bay but they will not be complete until 2020. The museum has been built but not much else (Figure 9.47). Thus there are some jobs available but not so many as there were previously. Second, one of the new developments on Montserrat was a new airstrip. Once this was built, the UK and US governments stopped subsidising the ferry that operated between Antigua and Montserrat. This made it more difficult to get to Montserrat, both for visitors and for people importing basic goods. Thus the number of tourists to the island fell and the price of goods on the island rose. Many Montserratians were against the airstrip and campaigned unsuccessfully for the port to be kept open. It is possible to charter a boat and sail to Montserrat but it is far more expensive than taking a ferry.

Thus with fewer jobs in construction, a declining tourist sector and rising prices, many Montserratians left the island for a second time. Many went to Antigua and others went to locations such as Canada, the USA and the UK. Much of the aid that was given to Montserrat following the eruptions of 1997 has dried up. The UK provided over \$120 million of aid but announced in 2002 that it was phasing out aid to the island. Nevertheless, in 2004 it announced a £40 million aid deal over three years.



Figure 9.47 Montserrat museum

The volcano has been relatively quiet for the last few years. However, there was an event in May 2006 that was relatively unreported. The Soufrière dome collapsed, causing a tsunami that affected some coastal areas of Guadeloupe, and English Harbour and Jolly Harbour in Antigua. The Guadeloupe tsunami was 1 metre high and the one in Antigua between 20 and 30 centimetres. No-one was injured in the tsunami but flights were cancelled between Venezuela and Miami, and

to and from Aruba, due to the large amount of ash in the atmosphere.

So while volcanic activity in Montserrat is currently quiet, the volcano continues to have a major impact on all those who remain on the island. The economic outlook for the island does not look good – and that is largely related to the lack of aid, the difficulty and cost of reaching Montserrat and the small size of the island and its population.