

Feature Story

Iceland's Mount Doom



The eruption of an Icelandic volcano disrupted European aviation in mid March. Jessica Fan spoke to the production team of documentary *Naked Science – Icelandic Volcano*, the only crew to film the eruption from beginning to end.

ON March 20, the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull erupted. The impact was as complicated as the pronunciation of the name of the volcano. Airports in Britain were forced to close, followed by airports in Ireland, Norway, France and five other European countries. At least 4,000 flights were cancelled, an **unprecedented** level of disruption.

Before all the chaos, a documentary crew was already in Iceland two weeks prior to the eruption. Studying precise data from the Icelandic Meteorological Office, the team were predicting an eruption would occur somewhere between mid and late March. They were able to capture **footage** of the eruption from the outset.

Producer of the programme Anna Dís Ólafsdóttir remarked: “We were watching the activity closely but we never knew how big the consequences would be.”

The five-people crew was the first one to land at the volcano when the eruption started.

Naked Science – Icelandic Volcano was broadcast in Hong Kong on National Geographic Channel in early May and re-run in early June. The team filmed stunning eruption scenes and interviewed locals living at the foothills of the volcano.

Flying amid an eruption

WHILE all flights were banned from flying for safety reasons, the crew was able to persuade a “young, brave and good pilot” to fly a helicopter close to the volcano in order to capture

amazing footage. Director of the documentary Jóhann Sigfússon said this was the most exciting experience.

“When the volcano erupted, there was lots of **turbulence** and the helicopter was falling. It was so difficult to fly. Eyjafjallajökull is a huge volcano and we flew so close that you felt you could throw a ball into the crater! Adrenaline was pumping for sure.”

Flying a helicopter near an erupting volcano is dangerous. How did Sigfússon make sure the trip was safe?

“There’s no problem if you fly at a safe distance. And remember not to enter the ash cloud as it would stop the engine. We flew as close as 200 metres away from the volcano and not any closer. At the same time we were under surveillance by the local coast guard to ensure our safety,” he explained.

Sigfússon was determined to make the film for the sake of his art. “My job is to go as close as I can for the audience, therefore we go as far as we can.”

This explains why the team insisted on visiting a female farmer living at the foothills of Eyjafjallajökull even when volcanic ash was blocking the road and their car was running out of gas.

They were driving at 2pm in the afternoon but the sky was as dark as in the evening, while the air was filled with tiny particles from the ash, as remembers Sigfússon. They were wearing masks inside the car and the GPS was not working due to the **magnetic** forces of the **seismic** activity on Iceland.

Fortunately the team was able to reach their destination, but the farmer was

reluctant to leave the house even with the volcano erupting fiercely up the hill. Sigfússon recalls: “Her sheep had just given birth to a baby. She said that ‘life goes on’ even when the whole area was being **enveloped** by ash.”

The director asked her to leave the house and join the filming process, but the lady refused. “She said she preferred staying with her animals. I was deeply touched by her bravery and determination.”

Living with a volcano

THE woman living by the volcano felt at one with nature even when it was threatening her and therefore she felt little need to leave her home. Growing up in an urban jungle like Hong Kong, it is difficult for us to feel such a close attachment with nature as this woman does, unless, perhaps, when it strikes us in the form of a disaster.

“Humans always think we control the planet, but it isn’t like that, nature controls us,” observed Sigfússon.

“When you’re standing by a volcano like this, you’re feeling it on your body, your hair and the explosion makes you feel you’re very tiny, very small. We realised how small we really are, compared to Mother Nature. I think it would be very wise to remember that.”

Ash and aviation

Airports in Britain were closed from April 14 to 20 due to the eruption in Iceland. Other European countries followed suit for safety reasons, but why? How can tiny ash particles have such a great impact on the world?

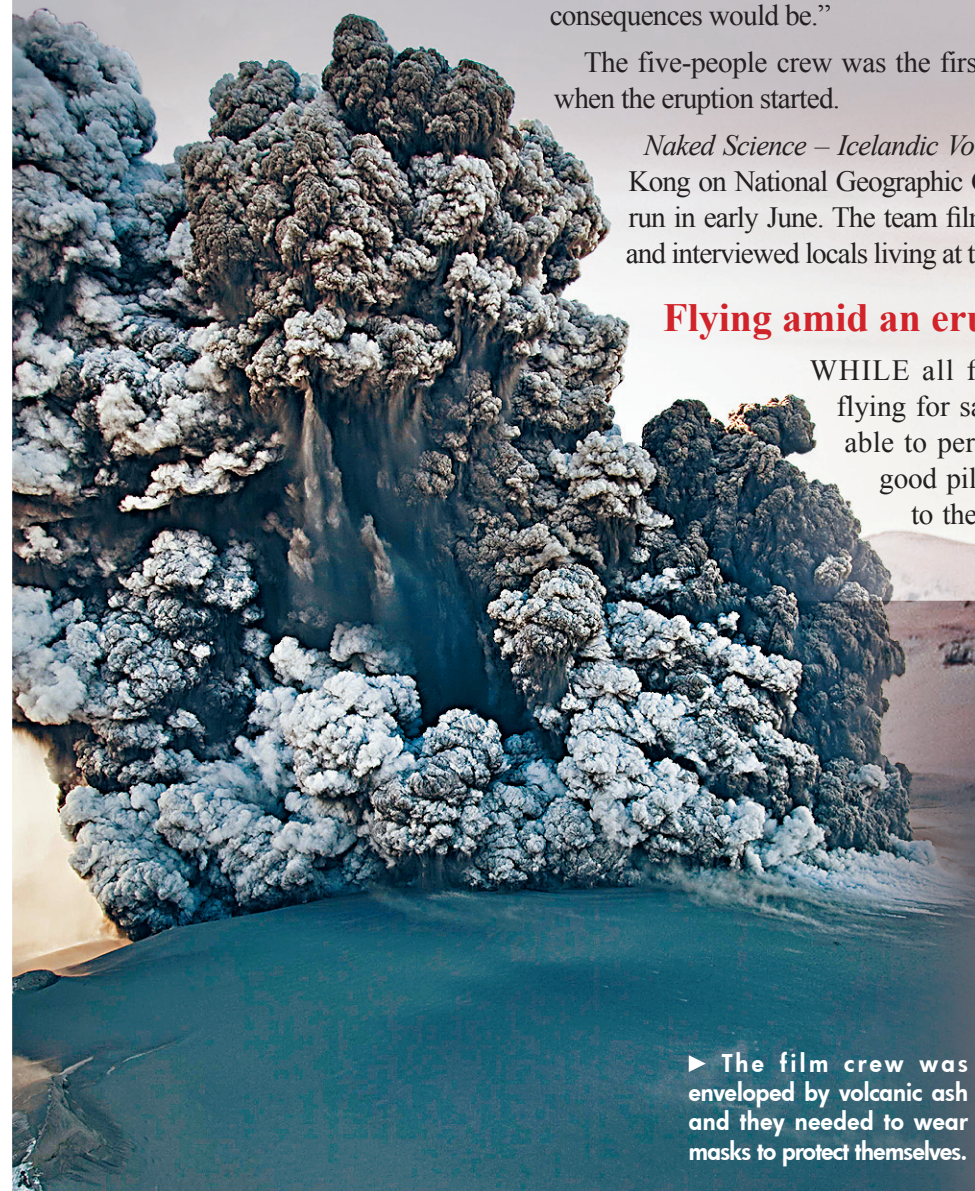
The Icelandic volcanic eruption was unique as lava met glacial ice when it shot out the volcano. Ash combined with heat and cooling iced water turned the magma into a powdery mixture of extremely sharp, glass-like particles. These particles had strong **abrasive** power and people running in such ash would feel like they are being sand blasted.

Since these particles would be sucked into the engine of a plane and coat the turbines, the engine would stop functioning and stop propelling the plane, likely causing a crash. There was a similar situation when a British Airways flight flew over an ash cloud in Malaysia. Passengers saw flames come from the engine and go around the plane. Luckily the aircraft lowered its altitude and landed immediately and no one was hurt.

Director Sigfússon suggests an action plan be drawn up to prevent chaos again the next time there is a volcanic eruption in Iceland. “Wind usually blows from west to east, which pushes ash plume to Europe. We have to remember that Iceland is a young country with 22 volcanoes. We have to be prepared for possible eruptions that might have a global impact in the future.”

Naked Science – Icelandic Volcano

- June 6 (Sat), 5pm
- National Geographic Channel



► The film crew was enveloped by volcanic ash and they needed to wear masks to protect themselves.



► This satellite photo was taken by American space agency NASA's Terra Satellite on April 19. The volcanic ash from Eyjafjallajökull extended southward in a broad brown plume. The plume blew south and then curved east over the ocean, blending with the outer bands of a low-pressure system.

