

I Love Eyjafjallajökull in Springtime

Written by Vivian Bikulege



On Thursday, April 15, I was working the last day of a three-day global exposition called “In-Cosmetics” in Paris, France. The day before, a volcano had erupted in Iceland. Someone, a colleague or show attendee, casually mentioned that the Charles de Gaulle airport had shut down because of the volcano. Although this seemed odd, (a distant volcano impacting the French airport?), and because I was scheduled to fly out on Sunday, I had little concern about the situation, and went about pursuing my intent on concluding business for a few days of sightseeing.

When I checked in with Delta on Friday, my plane was still on schedule. On Saturday evening, I learned that my flight was cancelled, and I was placed on hold for one hour before I was reconfirmed on a flight departing five days later. Although a bit shaken and concerned about the delay, I settled into the idea that time would pass, I would make the most of an opportunity to experience life and work in Paris, and that eventually, I would be on my way home to Beaufort.

In an April 19 on-line article posted by the British newspaper *The Independent*, they reported that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) offered a pronunciation for the Iceland volcano Eyjafjallajökull as “AY-uh-fyat-luh-YOE-kuutl-uh.” A better way to understand the word may be to know its English translation – islandmountainglacier – a volcano under a glacier. Eyja’s eruption (I cannot pronounce it, keep spelling it, or say it fast three times) crippled global air travel and devastated airline profitability with the unprecedented closing of 313 airports, resulting in 65,000 flight cancellations, and effecting an estimated 6.8 million people.

Before I left Paris, (another topic I will touch on a bit later), I was privileged to take a ride in the rain on the Seine, view paintings by Van Gogh and Monet, touch sculpture by Rodin, watch the Eiffel Tower sparkle against the twilight hues of a pink and purple sky, and attend Mass at the Cathedralé de Notre-Dame. My epiphany occurred in the cathedral.

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Somewhere between the chords of a communion hymn bursting from the pipes of a magnificent organ, and the smooth French liturgy prayed by a Chinese priest, I realized that I was alone. In the middle of hundreds of people, housed in Gothic architecture, guarded by gargoyles and French ushers prohibiting photography, I understood that no one knew me. Many people could not understand my language. I felt invisible. I understood that the people that love me, *really* love me, were thousands of miles away. Inside all of that magnificence, wrapped by history, culture and urban sophistication, I was struck by the knowledge that my husband, my mother, my family, my dogs, my neighbors and friends, were all outside of my reach. I was being held hostage by a volcano, and by the decisions of the European Union. I thought about Dorothy in Oz, her red shoes (replicas had to be for sale in a Parisien boutique!), and her stalwart drive to wish her way home after a Kansas tornado. I understood the words home, and love, and care.

When I first caught the flash of news on Parisien television that a volcano had erupted in Iceland, and an earthquake, killing 2000 people, had rocked a Tibetan plateau in China, I briefly reflected on sister tragedies in Haiti and Chile, uttered a quick prayer for those effected, and grabbed my purse to head to a customer reception at Maison de l'Amérique Latine, a meeting place for the Latin-American diplomatic community in Paris. I did not think twice about a volcano erupting in Iceland. Iceland conjured up thoughts of a cold, desolate island, remote, with an almost faceless, and nominal population. But Icelanders are not faceless. In subsequent stories, I saw Icelandic farmers brushing soot from the backs of once white sheep, and families holed up together in houses, waiting for the ash to settle, so that a seemingly endless night could return to day. I recalled the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's painting of *The Scream*

that could well depict the maddening frustration of harried and fatigued travelers stalled by nature and man's constant struggle to engineer around her.

Outside my window in Paris, on the day Europe and Eyja set me free, sirens of police cars broke the dawn's silence. Birds began to sing as the newness of the day's first sunlight crept over block apartment buildings. The air was cool, and it played with the gauzy, white curtains that puffed out from my open window. It is springtime in Paris, and somewhere, high and invisible in the atmosphere, ash clouds of volcanic dust drift over the European continent.

On the bus between terminal 2E and Delta aircraft 1806, an Italian woman named Lucia told me that nature is "immoral. She doesn't care what she does to us. She does whatever she wants." But even if Nature and Eyja are heartless, they made certain that I would leave Europe appreciating what I have. Paris is truly magnificent in every season, but there really is no place like home. Dorothy and Toto knew it. It took a volcano for me to understand.

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