One reason we know so much about the ancient Romans and how they lived was because of a prosperous Roman town called Pompeii (pronounced pom-PAY) in southwestern Italy.

One day in 79 CE, time stood still in Pompeii. The nearby volcano Vesuvius erupted with very little warning, and within the course of a night, the people of the entire town were buried alive in volcanic ash and fire. When the sky finally cleared enough to see, the entire top of the volcano had been blown off. Along its slopes where villas had once stood was nothing but gray. Several towns had disappeared, and only the tops of the tallest buildings in Pompeii could be seen. It was hundreds of years before excavations began. Most of the buildings had been crushed with the weight of the pumice, but now many of them have been restored and roofs put on so we can go in and see what they were like.

Because the eruption happened so quickly, and because Pompeii was such a busy town, the excavations have revealed a lot of minute detail about its inhabitants. The ash and pumice which fell on the town hardened with rainwater, leaving the dead bodies and objects trapped inside. As time went by, and the bodies decayed, they left empty cavities in the rock that were shaped just like them. Excavation teams have poured plaster into these cavities to make detailed impressions, a perfect plaster cast of the men, women, and children of Pompeii. As a result, we can see exactly what the sandals the Romans wore or the collar of a dog looked like. We can also see plaster casts of bread and wine that were left on tables, or folding doors that divided rooms.

The ruins of buildings show that Pompeii had several public baths, a theater and an arena, a vineyard, gladiators' barracks, tombs, and two forums. There were bars and taverns, bakeries, mills, laundries, blacksmiths, shops, shrines, and gardens. Pompeii also had a wall all around it and many gates leading in and out the city. Probably 8,000 to 10,000 people lived there. Because it was on the bay, it was located in an area where there were many villas, and some of the smaller towns nearby were resort areas for rest and relaxation.