

# Lava flows push Icelanders out of small town

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Volcanic eruption in Grindavik, Iceland in December 2023

Hailey Brown — Three evacuations due to lava flow and volcanic eruptions have left the small town of Grindavik, Iceland deserted. The town's fate is uncertain, as questions of ongoing safety in the region remain unanswered. Despite having around 130 volcanos in its territory, the recent eruptions in the Reykjanes Peninsula are the first to impact a residential area in 50 years. Now, Grindavik's 3,600 residents and up to 31,000 residents of other towns in the peninsula must grapple with a shifting sense of identity as their sense of place in the world changes.

Place is a multifaceted concept within geopolitics that can explain motivations behind individual and group actions. Identity, one element, is people's attachment to or view of their hometown. It can be shaped by how much an individual feels they belong. For most residents of Grindavik, their sense of identity is still tied to the town despite their ongoing displacement. One individual, whose house was flattened by lava, told the *New York Times*, "When it is possible, and allowed, I will move back to Grindavik." Another, sure the town would regain its population, said, "If you live in Iceland, you have to manage to live with nature." This sentiment can be understood when looking at Grindavik's sense of location within Iceland. While it is known as a fishing town, an industry with long historical ties to the area, the geological features below the earth are just as important. The town tapped into the hotspots that formed volcanos to build a local geothermal plant where many residents work. Excess water from the plant fills the Blue Lagoon, a spa popular with tourists, drawn in from all over the world to see the peninsula's volcanos.

So, Grindavik's situation on top of tectonic plate boundaries and hot spots has shaped its sense of place in Iceland and the world. It is essential to the town's economy, providing jobs and bringing in tourists. But now, the volcanos threaten to destroy it. Past eruptions in the peninsula lasted for hundreds of years. If the town's residents and tourists can return they will need to adapt to a changing landscape.

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