Volcanoes In Canada

Many mountains in western Canada are volcanoes, including Garibaldi, Cayley and Meager in southwestern British Columbia (B.C.) Less familiar examples include Nazko, Tseax, Hoodoo and Edziza. Canada’s most recent eruption was at Lava Fork volcano in northwestern B.C. about 150 years ago.

Young volcanoes of western Canada

How do volcanoes work?
A volcano is an opening in the Earth’s crust from which magma (hot molten rock), ash and gases escape. Volcanic eruptions are driven, in part, by pressure from dissolved gas, much as escaping gases force the cork out of a bottle of champagne. When magma erupts, it is called lava. The type of volcano that forms depends on whether the lava is viscous (thick and sticky) or runny, and on how much gas it contains. If lava is runny, gases escape easily. A runny lava with lots of gas forms fire-fountains that spew into the air and break into globs that solidify as they fall to the ground. Small fire-fountain eruptions produce cinder cones (like B.C.’s Eve Cone shown below). When runny lava contains less gas, the volcano erupts in rivers of lava, called flows. Repeated fire-fountain and lava-flow eruptions over long time periods form gently sloping shield volcanoes. If lava is viscous rather than runny, gases cannot escape. Viscous lava with little trapped gas will pile up in steep-sided lava domes. Viscous lava with a lot of trapped gas will erupt explosively, spreading ash over wide areas. Stratovolcanoes like Mount Garibaldi, north of Vancouver, B.C. and Mount St. Helens in Washington State alternate explosive and dome-building eruptions, and may remain dormant for thousands of years.

Mount Garibaldi, a stratovolcano in B.C.
Canadians might experience ash falls and flooding or mudflows in nearby valleys. An eruption from a cinder cone like Nazko might produce fire fountains, lava flows, gases and minor ash. An eruption from a stratovolcano like Mount Garibaldi could produce explosions, pyroclastic flows (hot mixtures of rock, ash and gas), mudflows, gases, lava flows and significant ash, although such events occur thousands to tens of thousands of years apart. The last such eruption was 2350 years ago, at B.C’s Mount Meager. It spread ash as far as southern Alberta.

Where can you see volcanic rock in Canada?
North of Vancouver, the triple peaks of Mount Garibaldi are visible near Squamish. Cooled, hardened lava flows, recognizable by their columnar joints, can be spotted between Squamish and Whistler. Mount Baker, in Washington State, is seen from many places on B.C.’s southern coast. Volcanic landforms are also preserved in Wells Gray Provincial Park and Nisga’a Memorial Lava Bed Provincial Park in B.C.

What hazards do volcanoes pose to Canadians?
The greatest volcanic hazard is wind-borne ash from distant volcanoes. This poses a serious threat to aircraft and can damage crops, contaminate water and threaten the health of people with respiratory problems. The volcano most likely to threaten Canadians is Mount Baker, just over the Canadian border in Washington State. If it erupted, Canadians might experience ash falls and flooding or mudflows in nearby valleys. An eruption from a cinder cone like Nazko might produce fire fountains, lava flows, gases and minor ash. An eruption from a stratovolcano like Mount Garibaldi could produce explosions, pyroclastic flows (hot mixtures of rock, ash and gas), mudflows, gases, lava flows and significant ash, although such events occur thousands to tens of thousands of years apart. The last such eruption was 2350 years ago, at B.C’s Mount Meager. It spread ash as far as southern Alberta.

For further information on volcanoes, visit the Natural Resources Canada website:
gsc.nrcan.gc.ca/volcanoes

Or contact one of these Geological Survey of Canada offices, NRCan:
625 Robson St.
Vancouver, B.C. V6B 5J3
Phone: (604) 666-0529
gscvan@nrcan.gc.ca

601 Booth St.
Ottawa, Ont. K1A 0E8
Phone: (613) 996-3919
info-ottawa@gsc.nrcan.gc.ca

9860 West Saanich Road
Sidney, B.C. V8L 4B2
Phone: (250) 363-6500
pgc_info@pgc.nrcan.gc.ca

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