



COCK & BULL

ASHMAGEDDON!

Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano caused chaos around the world when it erupted during March and April, closing Europe's skies and compounding Iceland's woes.

Eyjafjallajökull. How do I pronounce that?

Aiya-fiat-la-yakult. Or something like that.

There's a girl in my Starbucks called that. What does it mean?

Island-mountain glacier, apparently.

Glacier? I thought it was a volcano.

Yeah, the mountain's actually called Eyjafjöll, but the whole area is volcanic. As it happens, the second eruption was directly under the glacier itself.

It sucks to be Icelandic these days, eh?

Yup. Its economy was bankrupted last year, and now this.

Bankrupt? I was talking about McDonald's pulling out...

There was also the small matter of its three biggest banks going under within a few days of each other, you might recall. British savers lost millions. The currency collapsed.

How can a country of farmers and fishermen have a financial crisis?

Err, because its banks were run by farmers and fishermen.

And then there was a financial volcano.

Right. The desperate Icelanders invented "ice banking", which is the practice of building a banking industry on foundations made of ice, and convinced British savers to deposit all their money in Icelandic krona. And then, in a twist worthy of an Icelandic saga, there was an actual volcano.

It's lucky the eruption was in the middle of nowhere.

Not really. Almost all of Iceland is either volcano or the middle of nowhere, and typically both, so the frequent eruptions are more of a tourist attraction than anything else. It was the poor suckers downwind of Iceland who really bore the brunt of the volcano.

Was any of this Gordon Brown's fault?

Most of the blame for the chaos was aimed at Europe's patchwork of 27 national air-traffic authorities, but Britain's Met Office played a crucial role in turning the situation into a farce. It has a state-of-the-art aircraft equipped with instruments sensitive

enough to measure ash in the atmosphere, but it was out of service for the duration of the crisis, which meant that skies were closed based on a best-guess assessment of the skies. The Civil Aviation Authority was also criticised for basically doing nothing.

So could planes have flown through the cloud?

The airlines reckon that the cloud would have needed to be 20 times denser than it was to cause damage to their planes' turbine blades.

But didn't a BA flight almost crash after flying through an ash cloud in the 1980s?

Yes. More significantly, a Singapore Airlines flight lost power to three engines flying through the same airspace 19 days later, but experts say that eruption was much larger than the "minor" one on Iceland.

Will there be an inquiry?

Of course. There will probably be 27. Plus several more at the European level.

And what will they say?

It doesn't really take 30 inquiries to figure it out. They'll recommend that we should have a single European airspace and better communication between regulators and airlines.

That's real blue-sky thinking.

Hilarious.

