

## The Caribbean Comeback: The Latest From Hurricane-Affected Islands

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Like a phoenix, the [Caribbean](#) will rise. That was the theme of an event hosted by [Virtuoso](#) at its 30th annual [Travel Week](#) at the [Bellagio Hotel and Casino](#) in [Las Vegas](#). The event, attended by numerous trade and consumer media, as well as nine representatives from different companies focused on the importance of continuing to share updates from the Caribbean as its product continues to come back online.

The representatives applauded the media for their efforts in covering the storm and the immediate aftermath, but many noted the lack of follow-up; they said media had oversaturated their publications with Caribbean updates and moved on, and that it's still important as islands continue to recover to post updates so that the travel industry and the consumers are both aware of what's available.

[Karolin Troubetzkoy](#), the former president of the [Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association](#) (CHTA), executive director of [Anse Chastanet](#) and [Jade Mountain Resorts](#), and the current president of the [St. Lucia Hotel and Tourism Association](#), spoke about several marketing issues that "the Caribbean" faced last year. In the aftermath of the hurricanes, Troubetzkoy noted that many consumers thought that the entire destination had been destroyed, when, in reality, only 10 of the 33 major islands were affected. An issue at the time was relating to the public how much product was still available. The caveat, as Troubetzkoy points out, was that a 'visit here, we're unaffected and offering a discount' approach was not the way to do it. To counter this, the CHTA created a "One Caribbean" branding strategy, where hotels and islands that were unaffected would pledge a portion of the profits to the recovery efforts. It was done in partnership with [Tourism Cares](#) and raised roughly \$250,000.

While product continues to become available every month, Troubetzkoy said that it may be upwards of four years before several of the islands are back at full strength. The good news, however, is the plan to be back better than ever. To help keep consumers up to date, the CHTA will be launching its "The Rhythm Never Stops" campaign, which will offer information about what makes each island unique. While it has not officially launched yet, it can be expected to debut in the coming weeks. In addition, the organization has a [Caribbean Travel Update](#) on its website with the latest.

Here's what we learned about several of the islands:

### Anguilla

[Thiago Sarmento](#), general manager of [Belmond Cap Juluca](#), says the island was in minimum operating condition by festive season after the hurricanes. By Q1 of 2018, most of the island was recovered, including several of its five-star hotels (such as [Four Seasons Anguilla](#) and [Zemi Beach House](#)). Currently, he estimates, 90 to 95 percent of restaurants have reopened. Sarmento notes the spirit of the people on the island, saying that the very next day people were out in the streets assisting with the cleanup. It was "amazing to see how fast" the island began to recover, he said.

As far as [Belmond Cap Juluca](#), it was already closed for renovations and the hurricanes did not impact much—except for the budget, Sarmento says. The resort is accepting bookings for its reopening on November 17. Looking at the books, Sarmento says things are looking really good for his hotel, and it should mean the same for the remainder of the island. All in all, the island should be at or near 100 percent by high season this year. "What we need now is for tourists to come back," he adds.

### St. Barth's

[Martin van Wagen](#), the managing director of [Le Guanahani](#), echoed much of the same points as Sarmento. Although the island was badly hit, many of the locals were out helping with cleaning up. He adds that the island was pretty fortunate in that many of its buildings were concrete and did not sustain much structural damage—rather most of the damage was on "the beach side."

Van Wagen says that the first tourists began arriving in November as the island's villas reopened. Currently 70 percent of villas on the island are operational, while most will be open by the end of the year. Shops and restaurants are also open, while the beaches and vegetation have been restored. [Le Guanahani](#), however, is not scheduled to open this year. Due to its location, where it has both a beach side and a lagoon side (it got a "double-whammy"), as well as the fact that it's within a nature reserve (which requires additional approvals), it will take longer to reopen. Guests can expect the property to reopen before the end of 2019.

Based off other hotels on the island, pacing and interest for festive season this year is very good—"the interest is there," van Wagen says. Many of the island's repeat guests are looking to help, but the best way to do so is by visiting, he adds.

### British Virgin Islands

Directly before the hurricanes, the [British Virgin Islands](#) was hit with a flood, which the islands were still recovering from before they were hit with both [Hurricanes Irma](#) and [Maria](#). [Rhodni Skelton](#), the deputy director of tourism for the BVI, says "my data is stronger than your data," when it comes to the impact that the storms had on the island. He says due to the storms, the islands lost about 90 percent of their tourism attractions and accommodations.

With tourism representing almost 60 percent of the island's "take," the BVI first looked to its sailing partners to help get up and running. While some of the options weren't quite as ultra-luxurious as some of the resorts on the island, these options did offer upscale-to-luxury accommodations and services. These sailings also allowed visitors to experience some of the other islands in the BVI (of which there are 60!).

As for the resorts, the BVI's two Virtuoso properties—[Necker Island](#) and [Little Dix Bay](#)—are expected to reopen October 1 and by the end of 2019, respectively. Additionally, Skelton says the BVI will be relying on its "CONGAS," which are six luxury properties: [Cooper Island](#), [Oil Nut Bay](#), [Necker Island](#), [Guana Island](#), [Aneгада Beach Club](#) and [Scrub Island](#). These offer eco-friendly options, wildlife offerings, farm-to-table dining, glamping palapas and more. He hopes these properties lead the charge in bringing travelers back to the destination.

On a personal level, Skelton notes the people are bouncing back, but there's still trauma and PTSD (during Virtuoso Travel Week, a dust storm brought back vivid flashbacks for Skelton, he told those in attendance). "Nonetheless, we are resilient," he says.

"There's a certain type of energy—it's like a phoenix rising from the ashes," Skelton adds. "This is the time to come to the Caribbean."

### St. Martin

Like many of the other islands that had representatives in attendance, St. Martin was very badly hit (by Irma); however, [Andrea Filippi](#), vice president, global sales for [Belmond](#), says that the island was not as fast to begin its recovery as the others. The recovery didn't begin in earnest until January, he says, but the good news is that the island is on the right track.

Although the airport is operating out of a "luxury tent," nearly 50 percent of flights to the island have been restored, and upwards of 70 to 75 percent will be available by high season, including flights from [Europe](#). The first portion of the renovated airport is scheduled to reopen in mid- to late-November, Filippi says. As far as the remainder of the island, roughly three-quarters is, in fact, operational.

Regarding [Belmond La Samanna](#), Filippi says it was relatively "lucky" when compared to the other resorts. It sustained damage to its beach and public areas, but only a small portion of the guestrooms were affected. The beach, which had lost upwards of four feet of sand from its shoreline, is now "immaculate," Filippi says. He adds the resort is confident it will reopen on December 10 and that pacing for festive season is very strong. On top of that, like many other islands, it's the repeat guests who are the ones coming back first, showing their support.

### Puerto Rico

[Puerto Rico](#) was hit by both hurricanes, although [Maria](#) was much worse. "Nothing prepares you for the aftermath," [Carmen Teresa Targa](#), an advisor with Puerto Rico-based [Condado Travel](#), says (to back that up, she adds that she's experienced five, now). But in that aftermath, Targa says she saw a "weird sense of community," where, although communications were down and getting in touch with loved ones was difficult, neighbors were out supporting and helping each other.

[Condado Travel](#), which has three offices on the island (one of which was completely lost due to the storm) felt a need to reopen as soon as possible. Not only did they need to get back to their clients, they needed to get back to their employees and their community, Targa says. Most impressive was that, even though they could not contact their employees, many of them still showed up at the office. "It shows that when disaster strikes, you need some sort of normalcy in your life," Targa says. In addition to trying to find generators for its employees, [Condado Travel](#) began hosting meals in its office; some of their employees lost their houses, but the meals also offered a way for them to maintain their sense of community.

To assist their clients, Targa and her father would wake up at 3 a.m. to keep on top of any flights coming into the island. They told their clients to pack up everything and stay ready to leave.

On the island, [Dorado Beach, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve](#) and [The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort](#) are scheduled to reopen in October, with many other properties also on the path to reopening before high season. Targa adds that the island is much more operational than people feel. She adds that the island needs travelers but that those on the island also want to say 'thank you' to everyone who helped and reached out during the crisis.

### How Other Brands Helped Out

In addition to representatives from the island, Virtuoso invited reps from [Royal Caribbean International](#) and [Tradewind Aviation](#), a U.S.-based aircraft operator providing private charter service and shuttle flights in the Northeast and Caribbean, to talk about what they did to help bring the island back to its feet.

[Vicki Freed](#), SVP sales, trade support and service for RCL, says once the company had returned its guests to safety, it took its ships to help the people on the island. RCL brought both locals and hotels guests who needed to get to the U.S. there on a complimentary basis. Freed notes that with many of the airports closed, another way to get people to safety was needed. On sailings into the islands, RCL brought in generators (over 500, Freed says), diesel fuel and pallets of food. Freed says RCL even allowed those on the island to bring their pets with them (whereas animals aren't allowed on their standard cruises).

An easy option for RCL, Freed points out, would have been to reroute its ships elsewhere, but the cruise line determined that "the human connection" was more important than a vacation. "We forewent profits in order to serve the communities of the Caribbean and we're, really, a richer company for that."

Today, RCL is calling on more Caribbean ports and has more guests sailing to the destination than ever before, Freed says. "We're doubling down on the Caribbean."

[Tradewind](#) offered similar support. Normally, it flies to smaller airports in the Caribbean, offering travelers a way to get from Puerto Rico to St. Barth's, [Anguilla](#), [Nevis](#), [Antigua](#) and the BVI. Since it was low season, Tradewind had three aircraft in the Caribbean, which were moved to the [Dominican Republic](#) to wait out the storm. [David Zipkin](#), the airline's co-owner, says Tradewind was the first to return to St. Barth's—two days after the storm—following an argument with the French government about actually landing on the island. On the way in, they brought supplies, and on the way out, they brought people. Zipkin says Tradewind flew over 200 flights in the following weeks.

With a base in Puerto Rico, Tradewind would bring supplies from there to the other islands. When Puerto Rico was hit by [Maria](#), Zipkin says that many of the other islands returned as much of the goods to help out.

In March 2018, Tradewind flew more flights to the Caribbean than they ever have. Many of the islands live and die by access, Zipkin says, but he commends his aviation peers for committing to the destination. Tradewind and other airlines are awaiting St. Martin's return, as it provides a hub for many of the smaller islands around it; however, other options remain (such as from Puerto Rico), Zipkin says.

### What You Can Do

[Jack Ezon](#) from [Ovation Vacations](#) was also in attendance, to speak about how he's helping clients return to the island and settle and possible trepidation among consumers. First and foremost, he said he was impressed with everyone's ability to come together to "really help see this region bounce back," and not strictly for financial gain but out of a moral obligation.

For everyone—and in particular the advisors, according to Ezon—gathering information during a crisis is crucial. "We have to become coaches, we have to become navigators, and it is our responsibility for putting things in perspective," he says. Much like what [Toubesky](#) said, just because one island is affected, doesn't mean they all are, and it's crucial to educate advisors and clients as to what's available.

On top of simply saving a client's vacation by relocating them if need be, you're doing an additional service by potentially expanding their world, sending them to a new destination, Ezon says.

Ezon adds that he was "shocked" to hear that many of his clients still believed the Caribbean was closed. But he blames the industry—advisors and media alike. "They don't know because nobody's telling the story anymore," he says. "We told the hurricane story, it's old news. But nobody knows what's coming back."

For the upcoming festive season, Ezon says that Ovation is 13 percent down for festive, 18 percent down in January but is in the black for February and March. As he and the industry continue to educate clients, he feels these numbers can improve. But "it's about being proactive." Advisors have to post on social, send emails and reach out to their clients to inform them of what's available.

Ezon adds that, like the Caribbean islands, advisors and media have to work hand-in-hand to support each other. In the end, by working together, "we can make us all heroes," Ezon says.