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How Travelers Can Help Hurricane-Damaged Islands

Volunteers are needed for recovery efforts in the Caribbean. Resorts, cruise lines and other organizations are offering special programs.



Planting native trees in the community of Cialitos in Puerto Rico. *Para la Naturaleza*

By Elaine Glusac

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Last fall, Kelly Hepburn, a real estate broker in Denver, thought about traveling to the U.S. Virgin Islands, but then Hurricanes Irma and Maria blew in, devastating the destination. In March, Ms. Hepburn decided to go to St. John solo to volunteer, joining projects cleaning up trails in a national park, painting at a local school and assisting at an animal shelter.

“I’m only one person and I know I’m not a huge impact, but getting the word out is important,” she said. “Though the islands are up and running there are big projects still ahead and a lot of needs.”

After the back-to-back Category 5 storms ripped through the region, anyone hoping to help was directed to give financially and leave the hands-on efforts to professionals. Now, six months after the storms, while fund-raising remains active, travelers are increasingly being invited to volunteer while on vacation.

“Just by visiting the injection of foreign exchange in the economy is going to help,” said Hugh Riley, the secretary general of the Caribbean Tourism Organization. “But some want to come to do something in addition to relaxing on the beach and we are seeing many opportunities for voluntourism.”

Following the storms, the [Friends of Virgin Islands National Park](#), a nonprofit based on St. John that maintains trails in the park, needed skilled sawyers to clear roads and trails. Now, it is seeking everyday volunteers (email info@friendsvinp.org). Those who can spend a week or more will be given a cot in a shared tent in a volunteer camp (email ivolunteer@friendsvinp.org).

Elsewhere in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the tourism board aims to link willing travelers with organizations seeking volunteers to restore gardens, build playgrounds, clean mangroves and reassemble school libraries. Send inquiries to Desiree Wilkes at dwilkes@usvitourism.vi.

In Puerto Rico, the environmental organization [Para La Naturaleza](#) resumed its volunteer programs in January and refocused them to address hurricane-affected areas. Volunteers can sign up for a range of projects including tree planting, monitoring iguana nests, counting birds and maintaining gardens.

The [Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa](#) near the El Yunque rain forest in Puerto Rico, which was [devastated](#) by Hurricane Maria, will coordinate transportation for and send packed lunches with guests who sign up to volunteer in the park. Duties may include trail work, painting and surveys and travelers must request a volunteer application and agreement in advance by emailing yunquevolunteers@gmail.com.

On Dominica, where Hurricane Maria also made landfall, a number of hotels are making it easy to roll up your sleeves over vacation. [Fort Young Hotel](#) in the capital of Roseau has just 41 of its 72 rooms open but is already inviting guests to come for five nights and spend three days clearing a section of the long-distance hiking trail [Waitukubuli National Trail](#). The package starts at \$837 a person and includes accommodations, airport transfers, daily breakfast, an island tour and transportation to and from the trail.

Similar programs are being offered by other hotels and tour operators, including opportunities to clear debris from a river and, for scuba divers, to clean garbage deposited on the ocean floor by the storm. The island tourism board, [Discover Dominica](#), maintains a list of opportunities.

Many of the luxury resorts on Anguilla are still rebuilding post-Irma, but the [Four Seasons Resort Anguilla](#), which reopened in March, plans to offer guests opportunities to participate in island cleanups through the charity [Anguilla Stronger](#) founded by Starwood Capital Group, which owns the resort. On Fridays and Saturdays, guests may also assist in distributing bags of groceries and household supplies to islanders. [Zemi Beach House](#), another partner in the relief charity, also offers its guests opportunities to volunteer at the distribution center.



Building a hydroponic garden in Puerto Rico.
Royal Caribbean

Cruise ships in the region are also making voluntourism part of shore excursions. [Royal Caribbean Cruises](#) takes passengers to the San Juan community of La Perla for projects like soap making and tree planting. Some enterprising passengers have suggested and helped build a hydroponic garden.

When they visit San Juan, [Celebrity Cruises](#) ships also offer trips to La Perla for passengers interested in volunteering in the soup kitchen or the community garden or working with children or the elderly.

[Princess Cruises](#) has announced a new series of service-focused cruises, called Travel Deep sailings, that will participate in volunteer activities on hurricane-impacted islands including Puerto Rico, St. Thomas and St. Maarten. Past trips have included building furniture on St. Thomas and removing over a ton of trash from Guana Bay on St. Maarten.

In the Florida Keys, which were also hit by Hurricane Irma, volunteers can email keydeer@fws.gov to volunteer to clean debris from the [National Key Deer Refuge](#), a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Refuge that provides vital habitat for endangered Key deer.

On Key West, [Casa Marina](#) resort named Christine Steinhauser its director of human resources and voluntourism. She primarily works with groups staying at the hotel to link them with volunteer projects in the islands, such as rebuilding trailer homes. Individual guests can also contact her through the concierge to volunteer their time.

While cleanup has largely been completed, areas of need remain.

Volunteer organizations, she said, “are still here, still working, still assisting with projects. They branch off in so many different areas you could take your pick of working in warehouses of food goods, delivering clothing and food and water or helping with reconstruction.”

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