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Anguilla Makes A Big Comeback

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Anguilla's Zemi Beach House Hotel & Spa ZEMI BEACH HOUSE HOTEL & SPA

Bonnie Bloom chokes up and some tears fall as she recounts how Hurricane Irma tore through her home island Anguilla in September 2017. But she wipes her hazel-brown eyes and puts it in perspective: despite the destruction, there was only one casualty reported on the island of more than 17,000 residents.

Still, the Category 5 storm was one of the strongest hurricanes on record in the Atlantic basin, according to the National Hurricane Center. It ravaged the island. Most homes and schools were leveled, and the island's only hospital was severely damaged, the NHC reported. The resulting economic losses are estimated to be at least $190 million.

Bloom witnessed this firsthand at Altamer, where the Denmark native works as the owner's rep. Made up of four luxury villas across 42 acres in Shoal Bay West, Altamer sustained $1 million in damages.

Altamer ALTAMER

In November, two of the bold, white geometric buildings by architect Myron Goldfinger reopened. Altamer debuted the renovated Antilles Pearl, a 12,000-square-foot, water-facing villa with five bedrooms (including an airy two-story master suite), an entertainment room with poker and pool tables, a 50-foot skywalk trailing to the turquoise Caribbean Sea and a rooftop terrace.

Amid the palms away from the beach, the cozy Petit Topaz duplex accommodates up to four. Tucked inside its private courtyard is a hot tub. Both villas come with a butler, who also can arrange for in-suite or poolside massages, in-the-sand yoga classes and more.

Just six minutes away, Four Seasons Resort and Residences Anguilla also got hit hard. The largest employer on the island, it was up and running in March after spending more than $10 million in post-hurricane repairs. The reopening brought a brand-new Ocean Terrace, a new waterfront deck to replace the one that was destroyed during the storm, and new furniture at Coba restaurant, among other fresh amenities. The hotel reports doing better than ever and came off of a sold-out festive season.

Cap Juluca, also on the island's west end, happened to be closed in August 2017, mere months before Irma struck. Luxury hotel brand Belmond purchased it three months prior and decided to shutter the hotel for a facelift. Belmond Cap Juluca finally debuted its new look in December. A $121 million revamp added an infinity-edge pool with palm-fringed terraces and sea vistas, Arawak Spa and fitness center and 25 new beachfront accommodations. Mallíouhana, An Auberge Resort, also reopened in December, and this year it plans to launch 11 new beachfront suites and a spa.

Four Seasons Resort and Residences Anguilla FOUR SEASONS RESORT AND RESIDENCES ANGUILLA

On the other side of the 35-square-mile island along Shoal Bay East, Zemi Beach House Hotel & Spa suffered minimal damage and was the first property to reopen in February 2018. Part of that could be attributed to owner Jeff Goldstein's swift action. When Goldstein heard about the impending storm, he instructed his staff to buy all the plywood it could, and the team worked quickly to shield Zemi Beach. The resort's 65 rooms avoided any water damage.

The waterfront boutique hotel took five months to restore its striking spa (a 300-year-old house brought over from Thailand that's made of ornate wood), landscape, pools and beach (which received additional sand).

Zemi Beach banded with Belmond, Four Seasons, Mallíouhana and other real estate owners and private employers to form Anguilla Stronger, a relief effort to support the locals. Thus far, the fund has raised almost $2 million.

"It's amazing how this island reflourished again," Goldstein said. "They are very resilient."

You see the Anguillans' resiliency throughout the island. Irma ripped the roof off of Ebenezer Methodist Church, a limestone building with sky-blue shutters whose history stretches back to 1830. It didn't stop congregants from worshipping and reconstructing.

Quintessence Hotel QUINTESSENCE HOTEL

The hurricane wiped out popular day-trip destination Sandy Island, a 10-minute boat ride from Sandy Ground harbor. The tiny cay once had coconut trees, plants and a shaded alfresco dining area where you could tuck into the local lobster, shrimp and rum punch. The storm left it a barren strip of white sand. But the family-owned business built a kitchen, bathrooms and makeshift tents and reopened in November to cater to the tourists who go there to sun and dine.

Anguilla is looking beyond rebuilding to revive its tourism. Quintessence Hotel was the first new property to open in Anguilla after Irma. The nine-suite boutique hotel debuted in January 2018 on Long Bay with a fine-dining restaurant, spa, tennis court, yoga pavilion and more.

The island also is working to expand Clayton J. Lloyd International Airport. A longer runway will enable the airport to accommodate larger planes, rather than rely on St. Maarten's Princess Juliana International Airport to fly in guests. It also is rebuilding the Blowing Point ferry terminal.

"Anguilla has made a remarkable comeback from Hurricane Irma. Hotels, restaurants and businesses are back to full capacity, and the island looks lush and green. Tourists have returned as never before," Bloom said.

"I was heavily involved in the relief work after the hurricane and the resilience of the Anguilla people was a serious eye-opener for me, especially the way people took to helping each other out. Many homes were uninhabitable after the storm, but everybody was invited to a roof over their heads by friends, family or neighbors," she said. "There are still homes waiting to be repaired, and hopefully with a steady stream of tourists visiting the island, people will be able to afford getting their repairs done and move back into their own homes."

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