

DEPARTURES

How Hotels Are Leading the Hurricane Recovery Effort on Anguilla and Dominica



Simon Watson

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writer pays a visit to two of the hardest-hit islands and finds that hospitality—along with determination and resilience—is leading the way to recovery.

By Kevin Conley on July 16, 2018

The trade winds arrive in the [Caribbean](#) from the east, over the Atlantic Ocean from North Africa and the Mediterranean. From December to May, the ocean breezes are a godsend and an economic boon, one of the principal attractions of the islands, drawing sunseekers and cruise ships and sailors—or as the islanders call them, yachties—to their beaches and bright blue waters. But starting in June, the gentle mood can shift suddenly, turning violent in a matter of hours.

The 40-some islands of the Lesser Antilles—the archipelago that stretches from the British Virgin Islands in the north to Trinidad and Tobago in the south—are the first landfall for Atlantic hurricanes, which strike them with full force. Irma, the hurricane that did so much damage to the Florida Keys on September 10 as a Category 4, was still a Category 5 when it struck Anguilla four days earlier, substantially damaging 90 percent of the government buildings and crippling the island's only hospital. The complete loss of electricity and the destruction of both the control tower at the airport and the island's sole ferry terminal seriously compromised communication and delivery of emergency supplies. Potable water was hard to come by. And unlike residents of the Keys, Anguillians could not evacuate to the mainland and/or hope for FEMA to provide timely aid. There's a sea between them and any source of relief.

On September 18, Dominica, 200 miles south of Anguilla, absorbed the full force of the season's second Category 5 storm. Measurements of the wind speed on the ground reached as high as 160 miles per hour. Two days later, when Maria reached Puerto Rico as a Category 4, instruments there recorded wind speeds of 120.

From an islander's perspective, there's no mystery about why hurricanes have names. "Maria played songs no one ever heard before," said Oris Campbell, the head of the local taxi drivers' association, who drove me along the treacherous roads of Dominica. It's not just that the name is shorthand for a specific hurricane in a particular year; the names also function as a tragic sort of island genealogy. In Dominica, they speak of Maria and Erika (2015) and David (1979); on Anguilla, Irma and Luis (1995). Especially in the Lesser Antilles, where the islands are so close together, the precision strike of a hurricane, which flattens one island and spares its closest neighbors, leaves islanders with a feeling of having been personally targeted. Anguilla is small and comparatively flat—one factor that makes it so ideal for beachgoers in the high season, when they're practically guaranteed a steady ocean breeze. But that also meant that when Irma hit, there were no mountains holding back the storm.

Dominica is a larger and more rugged island of active volcanoes, hot springs, waterfalls, rain forests, and cliffside roads crisscrossing the deep interior valleys and sparsely settled coasts. It attracts adventurers—hikers, divers, and thrill seekers who want to rappel down its canyons. Maria's winds and heavy rain broke through narrow passages in the dramatic terrain with explosive force, dislodging boulders and trees and throwing them down the sheer mountainsides. Rivers of mud and timber ravaged the capital city, Roseau, and stretches of roads vanished in an instant.

The differences in landscape also shaped the recovery. Because of the easy terrain and compact size of their island, Anguillians were able to work relatively quickly to restore electricity. Service was reestablished before Christmas. Anguilla depends on tourism for almost 60 percent of its GDP; restoring power to that industry was crucial. The government and the large hotels worked together to bring in supplies and to waive duties (a key source of revenue on the income tax-free island). By April 1, roughly half of the premier hotels were back in business. On the more diversified Dominica, tourism only accounts for 38 percent of the GDP. Agriculture—especially bananas, one of the country's biggest exports—was nearly wiped out in places, but thanks to the fertility of the central valleys—and the consistent rainfall—production has begun to bounce back. The financial sector—Dominica offers a selection of offshore banking services—was back at full speed almost immediately.

When I traveled to Anguilla and Dominica this spring, both islands still bore clear signs of damage. Immediately after Irma and Maria, people emerged from their shelters to a landscape they barely recognized. Many survivors I spoke with used the same word to describe the scenes they saw: *apocalypse*. But both places are beginning to recover their distinctive allure. In the current circumstances, traveling to either place should not be viewed as an indulgence but as an active gesture of support, a way of tailoring a getaway to achieve maximum impact.

Colin Piper, CEO of the [Discover Dominica Authority](#), the island's tourism board, shares statistics in a soft-spoken manner. "We need to communicate our message of recovery cautiously," he told me, insisting that the message needs to be, as he put it, "truth-worthy."

Forty-three percent of the island's 962 hotel rooms are now back, he told me: 412 open, with 200 more on the way, and 400 still severely damaged. Few of those reopened rooms are in the luxury sector, though, apart from those at [Pagua Bay House](#) (rooms from \$240) on the island's Atlantic Coast. Other top-tier properties, like [Secret Bay](#), seem to have decided to launch extensive renovations or, like [Jungle Bay](#), to rebuild completely in a new, safer location.



Kevin Conley (L); Getty Images/Stockphoto (R)

Other varieties of tourism are starting to return. [Cruise tourism](#), which is not dependent on the stock of available hotel rooms, had reached almost 20 percent of pre-hurricane levels at the time of my visit. Seven of 12 diving operations—Dominica boasts some of the most stunning coral reefs in the Caribbean—were back in business, despite the loss of several key jetties. Adventure tourists can now hike 13 of the 114 miles of Waitukubuli National Trail, which runs from Scott's Head in the south to Cabrits National Park in the north. "One thing people can do, almost in perpetuity," Piper said, "is to walk the trail with a steward and pick up debris."

Members of the Portsmouth Indian River Tour Guide Association have cleared more than a mile of the narrow river where they ply their trade. I took a trip with one of those guides, David Thomas, who rowed quietly, directing my attention to points of interest. He gestured to a wooden shed near the mouth of the river—Calypso's shack from Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest, part of which was shot on the island. He spotted a green-backed heron, a scrambling land crab, and a swamp bloodwood tree whose red sap the indigenous Kalinago used to paint their faces. He kept pointing out the exuberant growth in the rain forest around us, a phenomenon that fortified many islanders in the aftermath of the storm. "We are stronger than Maria," he said.

Gregor Nassief, a tech executive and the chairman of the majestic cliffside eco-lodge [Secret Bay](#) and the [Fort Young Hotel](#) (rooms from \$280) in the heart of the capital, experienced a profound sense of gratitude after the hurricane. "We all thought we were going to die," he said. He had good reason to think so—a boulder had rolled into his home and over his left leg during a sudden mudslide, destroying ligaments and leaving him at risk of serious infection. His neighbors carried him on a stretcher to the nearby [Papillote Wilderness Retreat](#) (767-448-2287), where he was treated. The proprietor, Brooklynn transplant Anne Jean-Baptiste, had been running an eco-lodge there for 50 years. Nassief had expected her to be devastated by the storm—after all, her lush garden was now nearly bare. Instead, she opened the door and looked at him and smiled. "Well," she said, "there go all our plans!" The next day, after she had cleaned and wrapped all of his wounds, the two of them sat outside on her deck, looking at the changed landscape. "I thought she would be broken," he said, "but she looked at me and said, 'Isn't it incredibly beautiful?' That was her perspective: It was all there but the beauty was different."

When I arrived in Anguilla, six months after Irma, Natasha Richardson, from the [Zemi Beach House & Spa](#) (rooms from \$730), met me at the airport and gave me a tour—or maybe an inventory. En route to the recently reopened lodgings—carved out of the landscape between a national park and a pristine beach—she pointed out the abundance of vegetation. "After the hurricane it was amazing to see the growth," she said, surprised that abundance could come so quickly after such loss. She'd run into her high school biology teacher, who'd mentioned the same thing, citing the effects of essential nutrients like sulfur and atmospheric nitrogen mixed in with the heavy rain. "I know I was weeding my garden twice as much," Richardson said.

Anguilla is not known for its fertility. Colonial-era attempts at establishing plantations proved so unsuccessful that English planters soon said to their slaves, in essence, "Goodbye and good luck—you're free." Islanders survived their isolation by harvesting salt from an inland lake, cutting down trees to make charcoal, and building speedy sailboats that allowed them to engage in inter-island trade, some of which was legal. Development was slow: The first commercial lodging on the island, Lloyd's Guest House, opened to tourists in 1959, seven years before the advent of an electrical grid there. Now tourism is its primary industry, accounting for more than half of its economy. (By contrast, in Hawaii and Florida, the two U.S. states with the strongest tourist business, it only accounts for about a quarter of GDP.)

So, in the devastating aftermath of the hurricane, there was understandable wariness about how the Anguilla Anguillians all depended on would react. "The people of Anguilla have abandonment issues" stemming from their history, said Steve Watson, the resident representative for [Starwood Capital Group](#), which owns the [Four Seasons Resorts & Residences Anguilla](#) (rooms from \$850; [fourseasons.com](#)), a 181-room resort on the western end of the island. But within days of the hurricane, Barry Sternlicht, the CEO of Starwood Capital, had called for deliveries of water, food, chargers, radios, and other essentials for survival. At Sternlicht's urging, the owners of the island's premier resorts—[Four Seasons](#), [Malliouhana](#), [Zemi Beach House](#), [Belmond Cap Juluca](#)—pooled their resources (with more donations coming from longtime guests looking for effective ways to help), and together they launched [Anguilla Stronger](#), an emergency-relief fund aimed at sustaining the country until the economy can recover.

Anguilla Stronger also employed about 25 staff members from the Four Seasons until the property could reopen. Lisa Brooks, a line cook there, was dishing up employee meals at one of the organization's relief centers while efforts to rebuild her home continued. She described the feelings that overwhelmed her in the aftermath of the storm. "My roof gone, walls beginning to cave in," she said. "I began to ask God, Why me? How come so many people's houses stay standing? It took such a toll." The fact that Anguilla Stronger and the Four Seasons had stood by her gave her hope, she said. "You have someone by you that's going to help you to the end. It's like saying, 'Hold on—don't give up.'"

Many visitors to the Caribbean go for the climate, then fall in love with this quality in the people. The hurricanes served as a reminder of the deep reserves of grit and resilience that lie beneath the sunny exterior. As Caressa Phillip, a waitperson at the Four Seasons, said on my final night in Anguilla, "You know, the sand is still white, and the sea is still blue. They didn't take that away."