

Visitors Slowly Returning To Virgin Islands After Hurricanes' Destruction

[Greg Allen](#)



Trunk Bay on St. John. The U.S. Virgin Islands were hit hard by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Tourism — a large part of the economy — declined as a result, but people are starting to return.

Greg Allen/NPR

At the beach in Magens Bay, St. Thomas, the party is back on. It's one of the Virgin Islands' most popular beaches and by noon on a recent weekday, it's already busy. Reggae-inspired hip hop is playing as pickup trucks converted into taxis bring visitors direct from the cruise ship docks. Chris Dimopoulos

runs the bar, serving up margaritas, rum punches and something called the painkiller.

"We're seeing a recovery slowly but surely. Every day gets a little bit better," he says.

In the Caribbean, the winter months are the busiest time for tourism. This year though, many resorts remain closed because of the destruction of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The U.S. Virgin Islands were particularly hard hit in the storms. But visitors, the economic lifeblood of the islands, are slowly returning.

Throughout the Virgin Islands, the power is mostly back, the cruise ship ports are in good shape, restaurants and shops are open. But Gary Beck, in for the day on a cruise ship and enjoying the beach with his family from Toronto, says the impact of the storms is still obvious. "When we were driving here, we saw a boat in the water, underwater," he said. "We saw some of the buildings with no roofs on them. We saw homes that were pushed together."

In early September, Hurricane Irma hit the Virgin Islands as a Category 5 storm, with wind gusts as high as 225 miles per hour. Irma's high winds tore out roofs and windows across the islands. Two weeks later, Hurricane Maria, another Category 5 storm, slammed into the Virgin Islands with a storm surge followed by weeks of rain.



Joel Kling manages the 90-room Emerald Beach Resort on St. Thomas.

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"We had water rising in the rooms, sand in the rooms," says Joel Kling, who rode out both storms at the hotel he manages, the Emerald Beach Resort. "[In] building three and four we had mud running from the hill, filling the entire floor with mud."

Four months later, Emerald Beach is back. Using his own staff, plus some island contractors, Kling cleared the hurricane debris, repaired the rooms and replanted the gardens. Guests are now once again enjoying the beachside bar. Kling points out some of the new features. "We got new shutters," he says for the open-air bar and restaurant. "We got our sound system up and running. The bar was totally redone. The pool was totally redone."

Kling's 90-room hotel is once again hosting weddings. Nicole Lore was here from Maryland for her best friend's wedding, planned before the hurricanes.

"We were pretty nervous about it," she says. Her friend thought about finding a new location for her wedding but Lore says, "We're glad we stayed."



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Throughout the Virgin Islands, many of the small and mid-size hotels have reopened and there are villas and time shares available. But that said, nearly three-quarters of the hotel rooms remain out of commission. That's because most of the large resorts, which took the worst damage, will remain closed for the rest of this season and maybe much of the next. That includes Frenchman's Reef and Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort; Sugar Bay and the Ritz-Carlton on St. Thomas; the Westin and the historic Caneel Bay resorts on St. John; and, the Divi Carina Bay Resort and Renaissance Carambola on St. Croix.

Frenchman's Reef is the largest resort on St. Thomas and the islands' second largest employer. The owners say they're planning a \$200 million rebuild, but have an uncertain timetable for reopening, which for now leaves hundreds out of work.

Lisa Hamilton, with the Virgin Islands Hotel and Tourism Association, says the airlines responded to the decline in available rooms by cutting the number of flights.

"We went from over 13 direct flights a day from the mainland U.S. to three," she says. But Hamilton says the direct flights are slowly coming back. "American added a second one. They're looking at the hotel rooms and the demand. I do know that the planes are full coming in here. So people are ready to come back."

The Virgin Islands' government says direct spending on tourism accounts for nearly a third of the economy. Adding indirect revenues, [one estimate](#) puts tourism at 60 to 80 percent of the islands' economy.



Andrew Clutz with the islands' economic development authority says one upside is that resorts can now redesign and upgrade their properties to make them more competitive.

Greg Allen/NPR

But many here say it will likely be two years or even longer until all the resorts reopen. Andrew Clutz with the islands' economic development authority says, on the plus side, resorts now can redesign and upgrade their properties. That's important, he says, as the Virgin Islands competes with other Caribbean destinations.

"This is an opportunity for V.I. properties to basically reinvent themselves, reinvest and have a completely new product on the market," he says.

But, until the resorts rebuild, the economy in the Virgin Islands won't bounce back.