

UPDATE

St. Martin Starts a Comeback

The Caribbean island is recovering after Hurricane Irma last summer, with many hotels and restaurants back in business.

By Shivani Vora

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The Caribbean island of St. Martin is on the road to recovery following the severe damage it sustained from last summer's Hurricane Irma (Hurricane Maria had a minor impact on St. Martin).

As a result of the storm, the isle's two airports, Princess Juliana International Airport and Grand Case International Airport, were temporarily closed to commercial flights; Princess Juliana's main terminal also suffered structural damage. Many restaurants and stores on both the French and Dutch sides of St. Martin — the island is a dual nation — were forced to close as were most hotels.

Frank Comito, the chief executive of the Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Association, an organization that represents businesses in 32 Caribbean destinations, said that St. Martin was one of the most hard-hit Caribbean destinations as a result of Irma.

Today, the island is faring better than it was last fall but significant work will be required before it will be able to return to its pre-hurricane condition.

Gordon Snow, the managing editor of The Daily Herald, an English-language newspaper on the island, said that many buildings, including several large hotels, saw significant damage because of Hurricane Irma and still need to be reconstructed. "This is my home, and I love it here, but there is a lot of rebuilding to do, and some of it hasn't even begun yet," he said. "But this island recovered from Hurricane Luis in 1995, and we will do so again."

The Dutch government is helping with the recovery by providing the island with 550 million euros (about \$634 million) in aid.

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Mr. Snow said that the debris from the storm that littered the roads and beaches has been cleaned up. Kate Richardson, general manager of St. Martin's tourism office, said that the beaches are as she remembers them as a child. "The beaches are back to their magnificent state, and the roads are litter free," she said.

Both airports are fully operational and run around 60 flights a week from 12 airlines. Princess Juliana, which reopened in October with the one runway it had before the storm, has daily nonstop service to and from the United States including a JetBlue flight to and from John F. Kennedy International Airport and an American Airlines flight to and from Miami International Airport. However, the terminal that sustained structural damage during Irma is still not open; passengers are temporarily being accommodated in tent-like structures.

The island's other airport, Grand Case International Airport, reopened to commercial flights in September; the airport offers daily flights to and from Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Bart's and to and from destinations in Europe, Canada and the United States.

On St. Martin's French side, more than 60 restaurants are open for business as are more than a dozen hotels including the Bleu Emeraude, a three-star beachfront property with 11 rooms. The general manager, Frederic Morel, said that the hotel reopened on Dec. 15, and while business was slow over the December holidays and in January, reservations have picked up for February. "More than half of our rooms are booked," he said.

Ms. Richardson said that 300 hotel rooms are currently available to book on the island's French side; before Irma, that number was 1,700. At least 10 more hotels are scheduled to reopen before the end of the year.

On the Dutch side of the island, around 80 percent of the restaurants are open, and 1,600 hotel rooms are available to book, Ms. Richardson said; before the hurricane, 4,115 rooms were available.

St. Martin's Dutch side is known for its more than dozen casinos, and while all closed following Irma, according to Mr. Snow, some have reopened including Jump Up Casino in the town of Philipsburg. Casinos in the hotels, however, have not reopened, including the one at Sonesta Maho Beach Resort, Casino & Spa; the property's website says it is closed to guests until Aug. 31.

But while many hotels throughout the island are still closed, the island's attractions largely are not, Mr. Snow said. "The catamaran cruises are mostly running and so are the diving and snorkeling excursions," he said. Rainforest Adventures, a popular eco-adventure attraction with a zip line in Emilio Wilson Park, is also open.

Cruises, too, are returning to St. Martin: the cruise port that can accommodate larger ships, St. Maarten's Port Authority, reopened on Dec. 4; the 930-passenger Viking Sea from Viking cruises was the first ship to sail into the port. The island's other cruise port, Port de Galisbay, is once again welcoming small vessels; Ms. Richardson said that the port is expecting 42 small cruises this year for a total of 4,500 passengers. In 2017, the port saw 1,624 passengers. Crystal Esprit, a 62-passenger yacht from the luxury cruise line Crystal Cruises, is running weekly itineraries to and from the port until mid-April, said Susan Robison, a company spokeswoman.

St. Martin's government announced a 10-year tourism plan last November, and Ms. Richardson said that the first few years of it are devoted, in part, to hurricane recovery. "We're going to be focusing on regenerating the island," she said.