

CAPTIVATING CARIBBEAN

The Miami Herald

April 22, 1990 Sunday, FINAL EDITION

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The Miami Herald

Found on Miami.a.com

Section: TRAVEL; K; Pg. 1

Length: 1260 words

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Body

ISLAND OPTIONS

SUMMER LURES INCLUDE SPECIAL DEALS, LOW OFF-SEASON PRICES

In summertime, they say, the living is easy, and here in the Caribbean it should be easier than ever this summer.

For one thing, the damage wrought when Hurricane Hugo swept through the islands last fall has mostly been repaired. Indeed, in some cases hotels that suffered damage in the storm are actually be better than before, because the needed work prompted broader renovations. "The up side of Hugo is that when you build back, you build back better," observed Betty Sperber, president of the St. Croix Hotel and Tourism Association.

Another reason the Caribbean may seduce summer sojourners is that more good deals are being offered. Though room rates normally are reduced 30 to 60 percent in the summer off-season, some islands are going beyond that. Twenty-two hotels on Antigua, for instance, are offering six nights' accommodation for the price of five through September. On St. Croix, which was devastated by Hurricane Hugo, 24 hotels will give you seven nights' accommodations for the price of five, starting May 1. At press time, St. Lucia was unsure whether it would extend its seven-for-six deal beyond its mid-April cut-off date.

In addition, some individual hotels and tour operators are offering other inducements, such as upgraded accommodations, packages that include free air transportation, bar discounts and other goodies. Attractive air fares, too, are in the offing for those who travel between Monday and June 23. American Airlines, for example, is offering flights from Miami to Montego Bay for as low as \$179 round trip, or to San Juan or Santo Domingo for \$199 round trip.

Though Hurricane Hugo made its devastating swing through the islands just seven months ago, the Caribbean is pretty much back to normal.

Many islands, of course, were totally untouched by the winds. But even on Guadeloupe, one of the hardest hit islands, the damage Hugo inflicted is hardly noticeable.

At the Meridien Hotel, for instance, guests laze by a sparkling pool surrounded by lush flowering shrubs and trees. They do not know that the plants were all brought in after the hurricane wiped out the former growth. At the Club

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Med Caravelle, guests can see the entire beach from their balconies. They are not aware that the stand of coconut trees was so thick before that only a small part of the beach was visible.

The story in the other islands is much the same.

Many of the great hardwoods in the El Yunque rain forest east of San Juan were blown down, but new growth hides the scars and most visitors are unaware that a high forest canopy once sheltered the tree ferns. Aside from a few torn awnings and a battered royal palm or two, San Juan's Condado Beach strip bears few scars from the hurricane.

On frenetic St. Thomas, the shops of Charlotte Amalie hardly skipped a beat after the hurricane, though damage to homes is still visible on the upper reaches of the island. On St. Maarten, downtown Phillipsburg's shopping strip and ever-present traffic slowup don't appear to have even felt a breeze from Hugo.

In the British Virgins, the chic Peter Island resort will not reopen until next winter, but at Virgin Gorda's super-scenic Baths beach, families play in the surf and climb on the unique huge boulders as they have for years.

Even devastated St. Croix is getting back into the Caribbean swim. A temporary dock has been built to receive cruise ships while a new pier is being built to replace the one wrecked by the storm. Electric power has been restored throughout the island, telephones to most businesses and homes.

"Cosmetically, nature is very forgiving," said Sperber. "We're lush and we're green, looking like a real Caribbean island." To anyone who saw the island immediately after the storm, that's a giant improvement; then the winds had whipped the foliage brown.

"The hurricane did some interesting things," said Sperber. "Scuba diving is excellent now; there are cannons and bottles on the bottom that weren't visible before." Tourist facilities on St. Croix are still rebuilding. "Of the 1,800 rooms we had pre-Hugo, we have roughly 850 on line, and between now and fall an additional 300 will be back on line," Sperber said. However, three of the four biggest hotels remain closed. The Carambola will reopen this fall, the Divi and Grapetree are closed indefinitely.

Virtually every hotel in Christiansted is open, as are most shops. In Frederiksted, "it's a chicken-and-egg thing," Sperber said. Cruise ships will not resume their port calls until the shops are open. The shops will not reopen until the cruise ships begin to call. Most cruise ships will resume calling at Frederiksted in September.

On Guadeloupe, only one hotel is still closed as a result of the hurricane. The Auberge de la Vielle Tour suffered major damage and is being rebuilt.

But a midwinter tour of Grand-Terre and Basse-Terre, the two main islands that make up Guadeloupe, plus a visit to the delightful offshore Les Saintes isles, showed little other damage that would affect the tourist.

Flowers and shrubs were abloom in the Botanical Gardens on Basse-Terre, the mountainous and scenic half of butterfly-shaped Guadeloupe. The waterfalls of Carbet were plunging with their usual vigor from the flanks of Mount La Soufriere, the presently quiescent volcano. The great market in the city of Basse-Terre was as bustling as ever.

On Grand-Terre, the touristy strand of Gosier was traffic-choked in February. Damage to homes and trees is still visible here and there, but all the hotels except the Auberge appeared to be operating normally.

South of the main islands lie Les Saintes, islets that haven't lost their charm to the inroads of tourism. Nor did they lose much to Hurricane Hugo; the main brunt of the storm passed north and east of them.

I strolled on the main (and virtually only) street of Terre de Haut, peering now and then into tiny shops. I had lunch in a delightful restaurant overlooking the picturesque harbor. A trip to Les Saintes is a trip into the Caribbean past, totally unlike the experience in some islands where tourism has changed the character of people and the settlements.

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Winter traditionally has been the Caribbean's strong season, but this year hotel occupancy was down substantially on many islands. The region not only has had to recover from a hurricane, but also was hurt by economic jitters in the U.S. Northeast, its main market, and by competition from other sunny destinations.

One bright spot, however, was that Europeans showed up in greater numbers. Now the Caribbean's fastest growing market, European visitors also are giving the region a boost when it needs it: Most of them take their vacations in summertime, the erstwhile off-season.

Some other new developments in the islands, as reported by the industry newspaper Travel Weekly:

- * Tobago: The island's first deep water port and international airport will open by the end of summer.
- * Aruba: Hyatt, Ramada and Sonesta are opening hotels here this year.
- * St. Vincent/The Grenadines: These islands, the setting for Sports Illustrated's 1990 swimsuit issue, have created the Tobago Keys National Marine Park from coral reefs.
- * Dominica: A new cruise ship facility in the second city of Portsmouth will be ready in October.
- * St. Lucia: A new tender jetty for cruise passengers started operating in Soufriere this year.
- * Dominican Republic: Two new golf courses and a thousand new hotel rooms are coming on line this year. A lighthouse memorializing Columbus' 1492 voyage of discovery will open this summer.

Load-Date: November 12, 2009

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