



MARK ORWOLL
Contributing Writer

SHARE

Post-Hurricane Irma St. Maarten/St. Martin Tourism Update

Feb 11, 2019



St. Martin's Grand Case beach
Credit: 2019 Mark Orwoll

The first things that travelers notice in St. Maarten are the colors: blinding white beaches, emerald hillsides, turquoise waters and a sky that defines cobalt. But then, they'll see the devastation: what looks like a pirate galleon is half-submerged in Simpson Bay Lagoon, an elaborate villa lacks a roof, and debris has been piled on the roadside for so long that it has become part of the landscape.

On Sept. 6, 2017, the island was slammed by Irma, a Category 5 hurricane that left utter wreckage in its wake. Roofs were whisked away, and shops

were knocked askance. Floodwaters inundated hotels, grocery stores, schools and homes.

An estimated 90 percent of all structures were destroyed or seriously damaged.

Since then, significant progress has been made in rebuilding St. Maarten (the Dutch side) and, more slowly, St. Martin (the French side).

I traveled to the island in December to see the recovery efforts firsthand. What I found was both hopeful and unnerving.

Air Travel

Princess Juliana International Airport (SXM) reopened one month after the storm in a temporary tent-like structure. Arrival and departure operations returned to the renovated terminal in mid-December, 14 months later. A dozen international airlines now offer regular service to the island, including American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, JetBlue, Spirit Airlines and United Airlines. Long-haul airlift should reach 98 percent of normal sometime in March.

Hotels

Slightly fewer than half of St. Maarten's 4,000 hotel rooms and St. Martin's 2,000 rooms are back in business so far.



Divi Little Bay Beach Resort reopened in December.
Credit: 2019 Mark Orwall

Three of the most prestigious resorts — Belmond La Samanna, Divi Little Bay Beach Resort and Sonesta Ocean Point Resort — fully reopened in December following top-to-bottom renovations. Sonesta Maho Beach Resort, Casino & Spa is expected to reopen in February. AMResorts will rebrand the former Riu Palace St Martin as a Secrets resort later this year following a \$20 million upgrade. Last but not least, a 450-room Planet Hollywood resort is scheduled for Philipsburg, St. Maarten, in 2020.

Beaches and Towns

Many of the developments in St. Martin's coastal areas were annihilated. One of St. Martin's most popular beaches, Orient Bay was known for its restaurants, beer shacks, cocktail bars and rowdy saloons.

"The storm wiped them all out," said John Berglund, owner of nearby gift shop Tijon Parfumerie.

However, signs of rebirth include the recent Orient Bay reopenings of restaurants Bikini Beach, Kakao Beach (known as KKO) and Kontiki.

Similarly, the dining establishments of St. Martin's Grand Case were wrecked. A hopeful omen there was the Oct. 31 opening of Barranco, a super-chic beachside eatery already attracting a hip crowd. Many of the nightspots in Marigot, St. Martin's cosmopolitan capital, are still shuttered, but most of the lolos (traditional eateries) have returned.

On the Dutch side, damage was only slightly less catastrophic. Today, though, with sunbathers, beachside bars blasting music, and crowded shops, clients will be hard-pressed to notice any lasting damage in Philipsburg, St. Maarten's capital.



Philipsburg is the capital of St. Maarten.
Credit: 2019 Mark Orwoll

Nor are clients likely to observe any aftereffects among the bars, casinos and strip clubs of Simpson Bay, whose streets are thick with tourists. Not far away, gawkers at Maho Beach still thrill to the sight of arriving jetliners skimming just overhead, and Sunset Bar & Grill, a boardwalk-style restaurant-and-bar complex, continues to be party central.

Attractions

An estimated 90 percent of the island's pre-hurricane attractions are operational. Loterie Farm, an eco-adventure park outside Marigot, is once again welcoming guests to its drop-dead-gorgeous swimming pool, zipline course and restaurant-bar.



St. Martin's Loterie Farm has reopened.
Credit: 2019 Mark Orwoll

“We’re approaching this season with cautious optimism,” said owner William “BJ” Welch.

Another eco-activity park, Rainforest Adventures, near Philipsburg, was two weeks shy of its grand opening when Hurricane Irma arrived. In a tribute to tenacity, the owner rebuilt and opened the attraction — including what’s billed as the steepest zipline in the world — just two months later.

Also back on schedule are the popular rum tastings and factory tours at Topper’s Rhum Distillery in Cole Bay.

“We were closed briefly,” said Dave Herbert, Topper’s tour manager. “The big problem for us was there were no tourists on the island.”

Other popular draws that have reopened include Tijon Parfumerie, St. Maarten Nectar, Aqua Mania Adventures, Seaside Nature Park and a majority of boat tours and water sports. Conversely, St. Maarten Zoo, The Butterfly Farm in St. Martin and the upscale Blue Mall in St. Maarten’s ritzy Cupecoy neighborhood are closed with no plans to reopen.

Cruises

Cruise ships once again through the port in Phillipsburg. Port St. Maarten

estimates cruise ship arrivals will meet or exceed pre-hurricane levels this season.

Looking Ahead

There's a lot of optimism among the people of St. Maarten/St. Martin, indicative of why it's nicknamed the Friendly Island.

"How's business?" I called to a Grand Case restaurateur standing in his doorway.

"It's slow, man," he replied. "Too slow."

There was no bitterness — just matter-of-factness.

"But things get better, man," he said, with an unexpected smile. "They get a little better every day."