


St. Barts Bounds Back Big Time After Hurricane Irma



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I cover the world's best hotels, restaurants and wine.



Le Barthélemy Hotel & Spa is the newest deluxe resort on St. Barts.

Although God told Noah after the flood that He'd never destroy the Earth by water again, the people of Saint Barthélemy must have had their doubts last year when Hurricane Irma obliterated the French-Caribbean island. With losses exceeding \$1.4 billion, St. Barts lost much of its infrastructure, water, electricity and phone service. Roads looked bombed out. Plants and trees washed away. Houses and hotels destroyed. All tourism—the island's only industry—ceased.

Yet flying in from St. Maarten over the choppy Caribbean last month, I saw St. Barts today looking tranquil, its red roofs restored, the island turning green again. If not back to paradisaical levels, St. Barts is alive and well. All it took was tons of money—in this case euros—which is something St. Barts has plenty of, despite levying no income tax. Refusing to wait for the grinding bureaucracy of the Mother Country to send aid, St. Barts's citizens, municipal authorities and investment companies got to work. Today 70% of the island's phone and electrical lines are underground; within months they expect that figure will be 100%.



The main city of Gustavia is again lined with high-end boutiques and restaurants.

“Very little money came from France for the reconstruction,” Nils Dufau, VP of the Collectivity de St. Barthélemy and President of the Tourisme Committee, told me over lunch at Nikki Beach, “but France did waive the annual payment of €2.9 million we pay for services.”

True, many of the main roads are still damaged and impassable, so *déviations* over narrow, rutted side roads are numerous, which makes driving for a visitor as hair-raising as in Anglo country where they drive on the left side of the road. When you rent a car, they heartily advise you to get the extra insurance, and you’ll probably need it.



Ironically, Hurricane Irma brought in more sand to the beaches, as here at Le Toiny Hotel.

As of this writing, there are four of the deluxe resorts open—Le Toiny, Christopher, Manapany and Le Barthélemy, though this last is brand new and was due to open this fall anyway. Only Eden Rock will be closed for the entire season. Many smaller hotels and villas out of 800 on the island have also opened. Many are already sold out for the season.

Eleven flights a day from St. Maarten have resumed, though St. Maarten's main terminal is still not operational, so passengers must check in through un-air-conditioned tents. Meanwhile, on Gustavia's Rue de la République, lined with high-end boutiques like Louis Vuitton and Hermès are showing sportswear designed just for St. Barts, Dolce & Gabbana opened last spring with a wildly painted surfboard in its window.



Dolce & Gabbana put a wildly colored surf board in its window when it opened last spring. JOHN MARIANI

Getting building materials to St. Barts was difficult but, according to Anne Jousse, President and CEO of B Signature Hotels & Resorts, which owns Manapany, “It’s expensive but available at a price. The smaller family-owned hotels and villas *had* to get open as soon as possible to recoup losses from last season.” When I asked if the insurance companies were slow in responding, she said, “No, but then we own an insurance company, so it was not a problem.”

Employing staff is another problem: There is no unemployment on the island, but French citizens willing to come to the island will always find jobs in the resort and restaurants industry. Owing to the expense of real estate, however, staff members find it difficult to afford lodgings.



Air France flew six Michel-starred chefs for its November Gastronomic Festival.

So resilient are St. Barts's residents and entrepreneurs that they were able to mount a gala Gourmet Festival in the first week of November this year, after cancelling it last year owing to the hurricane. (I'll be reporting on this event and the dining scene on the island in a future article.) For the weekend, Air France flew in six Michelin-starred chefs, plus their assistants and family members to work alongside resort chefs.

When I asked Pierre Augé, chef at La Maison de Petit Pierre in Béziers, how difficult it was to bring in every ingredient they needed, he shrugged and said, "When money is no object, it is not so difficult. We got everything we wanted shipped in from France." Local fish were not as easy to come by.

Water supply, however, has always been a problem on the island. There are no wells, so all water comes from non-potable rainfall or from a huge desalinization plant using thermal energy just outside of the capital of Gustavia.

"Water is very expensive here," says Luc Lanza, General Manager of Hotel Le Toiny. "We take very quick showers and I don't even wet my toothbrush before brushing."

Tellingly, though St. Barts is a French island, the luxury hotels did not install bidets.