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# How St. Bart's Survived the Devastating Hurricanes of 2017

In the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, the glitzy Caribbean island is being reborn.



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t's rare to meet someone who's been to St. Bart's "just once." Like a highly addictive drug (minus the harmful side effects) the island is a place that hooks you after just one trip. I know firsthand, because that's exactly what happened to me. My initial visit happened over Memorial Day weekend six years ago and—like so many others before me—I've been a regular ever since.

The devastation that St. Bart's suffered following Hurricane Irma last September was heartbreaking to watch from afar, and unimaginably difficult for the hundreds of locals who remained on the island to weather the storm. But in the nine months since Irma touched down, the tiny French commune has proven its unwavering ability to bounce back after tragedy.



**EDEN ROCK, THE HOTEL OWNED BY THE PARENTS OF PIPPA MIDDLETON'S HUSBAND JAMES MATTHEWS, WAS VIRTUALLY DESTROYED.**

GETTY IMAGES

As I prepared for my annual Memorial Day trip this year, I couldn't help but envision an island that was a shell of its former self—a less perfect version of the paradise I'd grown to love so deeply. I wondered what it would be like to visit during a period of recovery; whether the island's vibrant spirit would still be present, or if there'd be a somber undertone as the country worked to rebuild.



Things would no doubt be different. Though nearly all of the restaurants were back up and running, the hotels, I had heard, weren't quite as lucky. Every single one of my favorite properties—**Eden Rock**, **Le Guanahani**, **Le Toiny**, **Le Sereno**, **Le Barthelemy**, and **Cheval Blanc**—suffered damage so severe, they'd be shut down for at least a year, if not more.

Still, there were glimmers of hope: two new luxury resorts, **Villa Marie** and **Hotel Manapany**, managed to remain (mostly) unscathed, and were already welcoming guests. And **Nikki Beach**, the glitzy beach club that's been an island mainstay since 2002, officially reopened Easter weekend with a new and improved outdoor restaurant, sushi bar, boutique, and beachfront area.



**VILLA MARIE, A FIVE-STAR BOUTIQUE HOTEL, IS ONE OF THE NEWEST LUXURY ADDITIONS TO THE ISLAND.**

COURTESY VILLA MARIE

"I visited the island very soon after the hurricane, and it was devastating. I've been traveling there for years and when I flew over, the island looked brown and dead from overhead. Saint Barth is normally so vibrant," recalls Jack Penrod, the founder and chairman of Nikki Beach Global. "We were very fortunate that everyone from our Nikki Beach family remained safe during the storm, but there was a lot to be done. Our property was turned inside out and we had to build it from the ground up."

Like Nikki Beach, many other businesses—including Eden Rock, the five-star hotel that was virtually decimated due to its waterfront location—found ways to see the positive in an otherwise horrific situation. The hotel even created an Instagram campaign using the hashtag "#SolidAsARock," which was used to chronicle its progress on social media.



COURTESY



"A lot of us took this as opportunity to rethink everything," says Eden Rock's Head of Communications Charlotte Darnaud, adding that the property was forced to rebuild entirely. "We wanted to keep the spirit of the place intact, but we're now changing everything we can. Many of the hotels will be completely renovated and new, so I think it'll bring a refreshing dynamic to St. Bart's when we all reopen in December. "

**B**efore I even stepped foot back on the island two months ago, I had my first inkling that the spirit of St. Bart's was still very much intact. I'd decided to fly via San Juan (the charter airline [Tradewind Aviation](#) offers one-hour shuttle flights several times a day) and as I waited in the lounge—surrounded by families, smartly dressed couples, and jetlagged travelers who'd just flown in from Europe—it felt just like old times. A porter told me that the airline had two flights simultaneously departing at 1:45pm, and both were fully booked.

Those who've been to St. Bart's know that descending to the island in a small commuter plane is at once exhilarating and terrifying. The runway is steep—like an amusement park slide—and not for the faint of heart. As you dip down below cruising altitude and inch closer to land, your stomach does somersaults...and then suddenly the clouds part, offering your first glimpse of the island's verdant hilltops. In that moment, the fear instantly melts away.

This time around, riding the physiological rollercoaster almost felt like a relief: despite everything the island had endured, the landing was every bit as dramatic and picturesque as it always had been.





After picking up our rental car, my husband and I cruised through town and were shocked by the progress that had been made. Sure, there was still work to be done—a number of the homes were boarded up, surrounded by piles of wood and rubble, and by the beach, there were palm trees that had been blown to the point of being horizontal—but all things considered, the island felt unchanged.

Nearly 60 percent of the 800 villas were back up and running, and tourists had quickly flocked to the available rentals. The town was bustling—groups of soccer fans had congregated at Le Piment, a local bistro, to watch a big match; at the beach, people gathered for mojitos and a sunset swim, just as they'd done so many times before.

We decided to split our stay between two of the hotels that were open, and headed to Manapany first. The 43-room beachfront property (from the French hospitality group B Signature) is St. Bart's first-ever "eco-resort"—the kind of pared-down luxury that harkens back to the early days of the island, before there were megayachts and celebrities. It was fresh and new, with an eager staff that seemed thrilled to be working again.



**HOTEL MANAPANY IS ONE OF THE FEW LUXURY PROPERTIES CURRENTLY OPEN ON THE ISLAND.**

MAX VANDERNOOT

Over the course of the next few days, we spent time wandering through the main town of Gustavia, where every boutique was open; we hopped around to a dozen of the island's 17 beaches, and hit some of our favorite restaurants, including **Bonito**, where the Friday night buzz and buttery salmon tiraditos were just as we remembered them.



When we checked into Villa Marie, a secluded property on a hilltop in Colombier, it became clear that most—if not all—of the hotel's 18 bungalows were occupied. Each night, the on-site restaurant Francois Plantation was consistently packed. And given that May is considered "low" season on St. Bart's, it was all the more surprising to see things were in full swing.

No place was this more evident than at Nikki Beach's famed Sunday brunch. The weekly affair tends to draw big (often rowdy) crowds, who come for the food but stay for the party—the kind of champagne-soaked daytime debauchery that the nouveau riche live for. (Admittedly, it's also become one of my favorite St. Bart's traditions.) But after all that island had been through, I wondered, would anyone even show up? I decided to make a reservation and managed my expectations.



COURTESY NIKKI BEACH / ARTMAN AGENCY

How very, very wrong I was. We sat down at 3 p.m., and by 4, the entire place was slammed—bottles of champagne were flowing like it was New Year's Eve, and human-sized boats of sushi were coming out of the kitchen with such frequency, I honestly thought a pro football team had showed up. By 6, everyone was out of their seats and dancing as the sun slowly disappeared below the horizon.

After one too many glasses of champagne, we struck up a conversation with a gentleman from Palm Beach who was seated at the table next to us. It came as no surprise that he, too, was a St. Bart's loyalist—he'd been coming to the island regularly for the past 25 years.

Over the blaring music from the DJ booth, he shouted, "Nothing's changed! Can you believe it?"

He was absolutely right.

*Heading to St. Bart's sometime soon? Here's an update on the status of the island's hotels, villas, and restaurants.*

## **VILLAS**

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Open villas include: *Barnes St. Barthélemy, Eden Rock Villa Rental, Villa Marie Villa Rental, Elan Immo Saint Barth, Ici et Là Saint Barthelemy, Immo St. Barth, Marla, Missimmo, Premier Properties St Barth , RE/MAX Island Properties St-Barths, SiBarth, So Barts Home, St. Barth Properties/Sotheby's, Terre de St. Barth, Unique Properties St. Barth, Wimco.*



**BLANC BLEU, ONE OF THE VILLAS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE FOR RENT VIA ST. BARTH PROPERTIES.**

LAURENT BENOIT / ST BARTHS PROPERTIES

## HOTELS

**Villa Marie** — currently open

**Hotel Manapany** — currently open

**Eden Rock St Barth** — December 22, 2018 (Eden Rock Villa Rental villas are open.)

**Le Guanahani** — November 2018

**Hotel Le Toiny** — October 15, 2018

**Hotel Barriere Carl Gustaf** — Winter of 2019 (the hotel closed prior to the hurricane and is under new ownership.)

**Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle of France** — December 1, 2018

**Le Barthélemy** — October 28, 2018

**Le Sereno** — November 17, 2018

**Hotel Christopher St. Bart's** — October 17th, 2018



A BUNGALOW AT VILLA MARIE.

COURTESY



## RESTAURANTS

Of the approximate **80 restaurants** on the island, about 60 are currently open, including: Bonito, Bagatelle, Ti St. Bart, L'Isola, Shellona, Le Tamarin, L'Esprit de Saline and Villa Marie's Francois Plantation.



**THE OPEN-AIR DINING ROOM AT BONITO.**

COURTESY