

THE MIDDLE SEAT

The Stranded Traveler's Disaster Plan

When a hurricane or other natural disasters hit, people far from home often must get creative to get safe

By Scott McCartney
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You're traveling and a big storm is coming. It's days away but you're stuck with no way home.

Before each of the [recent hurricanes](#), airlines added some extra flights and switched some scheduled trips to larger airplanes to help evacuate. But seats were scarce as demand surged from major destinations. "People from five days' worth of flights want to get out in one day, and it's not going to happen," a spokesman for American Airlines says.



Travelers in Miami waited hours to get flights out, many taking any seat to any destination outside the storm's path. More than 200 people who couldn't get flights were bused to Miami shelters. About 600 people spent the storm at the airport's in-terminal hotel and 40 others declined to go to shelters and rode out the storm in a safe zone between two concourses, the airport says. PHOTO: CAROLYN COLE/LA TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

Ferries and other boats that might be used for island evacuations get moved out of storm areas quickly. No one wants to risk having expensive equipment damaged or employees injured. And [chartering a private plane](#) cost tens of thousands of dollars. Experts say hunkering down is often the best option for travelers.

Travel insurance often isn't much help in these situations. Basic policies typically cover "trip interruption" and the costs to get home, but there's a catch. Your location has to have an official hurricane warning or mandatory evacuation order before most policies pay. If you wait for that, seats are already filled.

This year's major storms have highlighted the difficulty of evacuations, especially from island or remote vacation destinations. There are some precautions travelers can take. Some services can help if hired in advance for an annual membership fee. The cost is usually about \$1,000 or less.

Naomi Ayala of Dallas was vacationing on the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Thomas with her boyfriend when they heard that Irma was about five days out. They started to hunt for flights out on Sunday, Sept. 3—one day before an official hurricane warning was issued for St. Thomas. The only option they could find: buying new tickets for a Tuesday flight on [Spirit Airlines](#) to Fort Lauderdale, plus a Southwest flight home to Dallas from there.

On Tuesday, they watched [one flight after another get canceled](#), including their Spirit flight. They looked for flights to Mexico, Belize and other countries out of the storm's path, but couldn't get seats. So they stocked up on water and dried food and got a room at the Bunker Hill Hotel, a small, family-run downtown hotel built on a hillside with thick concrete walls that have withstood many storms.

For those who don't want to stay put, evacuation services are sprouting up. Medical evacuation services such as MedjetAssist, where you pay an annual membership fee for emergency medical evacuation services when needed, have been around for many years. Nonmedical evacuation services are growing. Medjet says it's considering adding optional coverage for natural disasters and pandemics.

Global Rescue offers both medical and nonmedical evacuation protection. The Lebanon, N.H.-based company helped find ways out of the path of the hurricane for about three dozen clients, including some on St. Maarten evacuated by Dutch military ships.

An annual membership for medical and security evacuations costs \$655 for an individual and \$1,155 for a family. Sales have been growing about 30% a year the past several years, says chief executive Dan Richards.



Cruise ships were used to ferry people from nearby Caribbean islands to Puerto Rico where they could get flights to mainland U.S. cities. PHOTO: RICARDO ARDUENGO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

iJet International, a [security advisory firm](#) for corporations, universities, government and nongovernmental agencies, organized evacuations for about 900 people from several areas of Texas, Florida and the Caribbean.

iJet sent a team to Antigua to coordinate evacuations and move from island to island to get people out. Chartered aircraft and boats took evacuees to Puerto Rico, normally a good staging place for evacuees because it has lots of hotels and a big airport.

Still, not everyone got out. “In some cases we needed to tell clients, ‘You need to hunker down,’” says George Taylor, vice president of global operations for the Annapolis, Md., company.

Both Mr. Taylor and Global Rescue’s Mr. Richards say one of the best precautions to take if you are traveling to a hurricane zone in hurricane season is to invest in reliable communications. Mr. Richards recommends a satellite texting device. It costs about \$400—cheaper than a satellite phone—and requires a monthly service fee, usually under \$20. (The fee usually can be suspended and activated for trips.)

Airlines say there are limits to how many extra flights they can add on short notice, and how close to the storm they can get. Spare planes and crews are few. Positioning hundreds of planes and thousands of pilots and flight attendants out of the storm’s path can take a couple of days when big hubs are affected, forcing early cancellations from storm-impacted areas

There are other reasons airlines shut down early, too. Outer bands of the storm can bring winds that exceed airplane limits for takeoff and landing. Airport security screeners, ground handlers, agents and other essential workers evacuate to take care of their own families and homes.

And airlines and airports figure an early shutdown minimizes the number of people left stranded at airports, which may not be secure shelters for major storms..

People involved in the evacuation say [JetBlue](#) pushed hard to get extra flights in. The airline says it flew 54 extra trips from the Caribbean and Florida ahead of Irma, carrying 4,500 extra passengers. And Delta got props from aviation bloggers for a flight from New York that slipped into San Juan between storm bands, loaded up quickly and [flew 173 passengers out](#).

Pricing is another issue. As last-minute business travelers know, when demand surges for the last seats, ticket prices soar. That led to accusations of price gouging, and airlines capped ticket prices out of Florida and other Irma-impacted areas, usually under \$200.



Evacuation flights were arranged after Irma hit to get travelers home. Here on badly damaged St. Maarten on Sept. 11, a WestJet plane loaded people bound for Canada. PHOTO: JOSE JIMENEZ/GETTY IMAGES

When Naomi Ayala realized flights kept getting canceled and she’d be stuck on the island of St. Thomas for Hurricane Irma, she knew just where she wanted to be: the Bunker Hill Hotel, a solid concrete structure built in a hillside high enough to avoid major flooding and walking distance to a town and ferry.

The hotel housed 11 guests who hadn’t been able to get out, plus the proprietor’s family. Ms. Ayala, who works for a major liquor distributor, had survived a Texas tornado but found that seemed to pale in intensity compared with Irma. Early Wednesday morning the electricity went out. Wind and rain peaked in the afternoon. Palm trees were uprooted; the roof was damaged. “There were four hours that were pretty terrifying,” she says.

Once the storm passed St. Thomas, Ms. Ayala and other guests spent Thursday helping clean up, mopping water out of the hotel.



Hurricane Irma did serious damage in St. Thomas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, when it passed through this month. PHOTO: IAN BROWN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

On Friday afternoon, a friend got a text message through that Marriott was chartering a large ferry to evacuate its stranded guests from St. Thomas that evening. At the time, Hurricane Jose appeared to be about 36 hours away from the Virgin Islands.

The boat took 620 Marriott guests from three St. Thomas resorts to Puerto Rico. About 35 people from other hotels showed up at the dock and begged to board. They were asked to wait until all Marriott guests had boarded. Then Ms. Ayala says one Marriott worker told them they could board. A second employee said no, insisting the local Port Authority denied permission because they weren't on the manifest Marriott had compiled in advance.

The Virgin Islands Port Authority couldn't be reached for comment by phone or email. However, Beverly Nicholson-Doty, commissioner for the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism, confirms that local officials blocked boarding because there wasn't time to process additional passenger names before the ship had to sail. "We had to follow protocol," she says. "It was not possible to accommodate passengers who have not undergone the registration process."

On Saturday, Ms. Ayala waited six hours at a port and got on a Puerto Rico-bound boat that had brought in relief supplies. She got a flight home late Tuesday, six days after the storm.

Confusion erupted. Some port officials told them the port had granted permission but Marriott didn't want to take them. The boat pushed off and port officials turned out the lights, leaving the three dozen stranded travelers to disperse in the dark. "It was heartbreaking and devastating to see everyone in tears watching that boat go away," Ms. Ayala says.

On social media, travelers accused Marriott of abandoning them because they weren't customers. Marriott says it had room on the boat and agreed to take the stranded travelers, but local officials refused. "As grateful as we are that we were able to transport our guests, we are saddened that we were not able to do the same for more people," a Marriott spokeswoman says.

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