

Here's How You Can Travel Back to Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria



Cedric Angeles Photography

Amid the destruction wrought by Hurricane Maria, a generation of young and passionate optimists is building a new, colorful Puerto Rico.

By KATHLEEN SQUIRES

JENNIFER Herrera first heard the winds at 2 A.M. It was Wednesday, September 20, 2017. The 32-year-old chef and her then-fiancé, Alex Merino, had already hauled a mattress into the bathroom of their sixth-floor apartment in San Juan's Isla Verde neighborhood, terrified of the approach of a hurricane that had flattened neighboring island Dominica two days before. The hisses, whistles, and howls beyond the thin bathroom door grew stronger, sounding as if the storm was right inside the apartment. When Herrera felt her 16-story building begin to sway, she wept. She prayed. She said her goodbyes.

Early the next morning, the exhausted couple emerged from their tiny bathroom, sloshing through 5 inches of standing water that had seeped into their living room. Herrera found, to her astonishment, that the apartment's windows were still intact. She peered through them at a world that was not. "Every beautiful,

lush tree looked like a gray twig,” she says. “I thought, almost automatically, ‘Are we at war? Did we just get bombed?’ It was like the apocalypse.”

What Herrera and Merino had awakened to, along with 3.4 million Puerto Ricans, was the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The category 4 storm, with 155-mile-per-hour winds, was the strongest to hit Puerto Rico in 85 years. Maria caused \$94 billion worth of damage, leaving thousands homeless and the entire population without electricity for months. It took 2,975 lives.

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Those who survived endured a limbo of deprivation. They waited hours in line at supermarkets, gas stations, and banks. Some stayed inside for fear of potential looting and violence. Cell phones were useless. Overtaxed generators broke down. As days and weeks turned into months, more than 100,000 Puerto Ricans who had evacuated decided to stay away permanently.

The calculus may be grim, but what the statistics don't show is what remains: a stunning commitment among residents to help those around them and to rebuild. And amid the ubiquitous blue tarps that continue to drape over still-roofless buildings in San Juan, there's something humming. Young and passionate Puerto Ricans are doubling down and expanding their ventures with a fresh crop of hotels, restaurants, and bars. It's a bracing, beautiful optimism.

HERRERA'S path forward began in service. “I couldn't just stay in my apartment knowing that there was so much destruction,” she says. “And then I heard that José Andrés was coming.”

Andrés, a renowned chef with restaurants in the United States, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, was also the founder of World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit organization formed to provide aid to Haitians after the island's 2010 earthquake. Within five days of Maria's landfall, Andrés and World Central Kitchen were already feeding thousands of people daily at the José Miguel Agrelot Coliseum, a Superdome-like structure that had sustained significant damage but provided the space the team needed. Herrera joined Andrés's army of cooks and volunteers, and the chef put her to work. Every afternoon, she would oversee 500 volunteers who made 100,000 hot meals and 40,000 to 50,000 ham-and-cheese sandwiches to distribute the following day. In the mornings, she'd head into towns and villages outside the city with a team of armed Homeland Security officers (and two Jeeps packed with food) to scout sites for satellite feeding programs. Along the way, she'd pass out sandwiches,

fruit, and whatever else they had available that day. If the location had fundamental resources like water and a place to set up operations, she'd return to organize the feeding program, train cooks, and get things rolling.

"I did this for 20 hours a day, seven days a week, for four months," she says. Ultimately, Herrera helped open 22 kitchens that each produced 5,000 meals a day.

What Herrera—a Puerto Rican by blood but New Yorker by birth—gained in this full-tilt work was a crash course on her heritage. "Being in the field, being connected with community leaders, I became connected with Puerto Rico," she says. She and Merino went back to the mainland to get married earlier this year, and returned to the island with big plans, including opening her own bakery, La Condesa Figueroa, in Old San Juan next summer. She is also developing a "farm-to-pastry" program to mentor kids and boost the farming community, and is working with Marriott International to help develop an emergency disaster-relief tool kit. A recent visit to family in Ponce, a city on the island's southern coast, reminded her of what will always be at stake. "My aunt still has a blue tarp instead of a roof," she says. "I feel a responsibility to mobilize people to never give up, especially in the face of disaster."

"I'M from here and I won't quit," Loisse Herger says. The 39-year-old hotelier is sitting in the rooftop lounge of her O:live Boutique Hotel in Condado, San Juan's oceanfront neighborhood that is home to a parade of luxury hotels, many of them members of deep-pocketed hospitality groups that are investing millions of dollars to bring their properties back online. (Many already have—see below.)

Herger and her husband, Fernando Davila, a civil engineer, were already underway with their second project—a 26-room sister hotel called O:LV 55 that sits just a block away—when Maria hit. O:live Boutique Hotel survived the storm with minor damage, so Herger turned her attention immediately to keeping stranded guests calm, sheltered, and fed for weeks as they waited for flights to take them home.

And while the couple had planned to open their second hotel by the summer, they surmounted setbacks in materials and labor to put O:LV 55 on schedule to open in December. The new property, with its greenery-covered walls, seems almost a mission statement. "Puerto Rico is always green, but just after the hurricane, the landscape was brown and ugly," Herger says. "When I saw that, I started crying. I never cry for anything. But I cried for Puerto Rico. It dawned on me how much I really love this island."

Inside, O:LV 55's black-and-white marble interiors have a modern, post-tropics sensibility, which Herger says is symbolic of a design renaissance on the island. "There is a lot more attention to design in San Juan right now," she says. "Everywhere you look—new architecture, restaurants, yoga studios, coffee shops, even Airbnbs. I think San Juan has the potential to be the art and design capital of the Caribbean."

Herger and Davila see their obligation to the new aesthetic of San Juan as reaching beyond their hotel walls: The couple has adopted a promenade across from their properties, alongside the Condado Lagoon, a serene waterway of paddleboarders and small craft. "We put a lot of investment in making the surrounding area beautiful," she says. "We couldn't wait for the government to clean the streets after the hurricane. We did it. We did it because we feel it is our duty."

WITH an easy and near-constant smile, Mario Ormaza might be taken as being a bit of a softy. And maybe that's why, when the 38-year-old restaurateur/chef learned of Hurricane Maria's projected Puerto Rico landfall, he raced to secure his five restaurants and distribute food to his 70 employees before the storm hit. With winds accelerating, Ormaza made another frantic set of rounds. He checked on extended family, making sure their apartments were battened down. He helped neighbors find shelter.

It grew dark, and fierce. It was 9 p.m. when he finally returned to his apartment to join his girlfriend, Cristina Jiminián, only to realize the one thing he'd neglected: himself. And a ninth-floor apartment with windows that were large and vulnerable.

"We weren't safe there," Ormaza says.

In the mounting storm, they fled to a friend's. The next morning, Ormaza returned to find he'd been right. The windows had blown out, and the apartment was flooded with 8 inches of water. "Things were scattered all over the apartment," he says. "What had been in the bedroom was in the kitchen. Everything was trashed." Even after hours of bailing out water and securing tarps where the windows had been, Ormaza was focused on getting his restaurants open. "I realized people in the community needed to eat. They likely didn't have much food, nor a way to prepare it."

Ormaza set up a relief operation at Café Tresbé, the first restaurant he opened (in 2010) after having trained with renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten

on the mainland. The little café—built into a Crayola yellow shipping container set in the midst of the raffishly artsy Santurce neighborhood—had set the tone for Ormaza’s burgeoning culinary empire. And now, thanks to a generator, it was a bright spot in a city wanting for just that. “People were grateful to have a place to come,” he says. “Everyone was struggling. They had no power. There was a curfew. So having a place outside their home, away from the reality of what was happening, was important. We were like an oasis for the whole neighborhood.”

Ormaza’s connection to that neighborhood runs deep. He was born and raised in Santurce, and pioneered the rejuvenation of its Loiza Street with Tresbé. Little by little, he expanded the space, adding poke-and-sushi bar Dos Palillos and coffeehouse Café con Cé. Today the complex bustles with families, beachgoers, and young creative types. Across the street, the flowery murals of Sabrina, Ormaza’s bistro, mark it as the stylish big sister. Azucena, which Ormaza opened in summer 2018, is the cool aunt, with a locally sourced menu of contempo-traditional fare.

In the months since the storm, Ormaza has brought all of his restaurants back. And like Herrera and Herger, he’s doubling down post-Maria—expanding Sabrina with a juice bar, a lounge, and a seven-room boutique hotel on top. He tells this story while sitting in his apartment, where blue tarps cast the room in a surreal tint; he remains on a waiting list to get his windows replaced.

Jiminián walks into the room with two dogs: inky black Candela, and Calle, a mishmash of gray, cream, and brown. The sweet-natured pair are right at Jiminián’s ankles, as if they’ve spent their whole lives in her sway. But these dogs, in fact, are very recent additions to the family: Ormaza and Jiminián found them wandering the streets of Santurce, one orphaned just before the storm, one just after. Ormaza pulls Candela close and massages the ruff around her neck. “These guys were the best thing to come out of the hurricane,” he says, and it’s impossible not to believe that even in a world turned upside down, a city still draped in tarps, there’s good to be found.

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“For those of us who stayed, Puerto Rico right now is the land of opportunity,” Ormaza says, giving his dog a squeeze. “It doesn’t matter how many hurricanes hit us. We’re going to get back on track.”

Take a Volunteer Vacation

Want an experience that connects you directly to the recovery? These two organizations can help.

Visit Rico is a nonprofit geared toward boosting the agriculture community via farm stays, locavore dinners, and volunteer efforts working with more than 100 farms across the island. A conservation trust with a mission to preserve and protect the island's ecosystem, Para la Naturaleza engages volunteers with environmental tasks ranging from planting trees and gardening to tracking endangered species.

WATCH: Puerto Rico from Above

Stay Here

New

The first boutique hotel from the Serafina restaurant group, Serafina Beach Hotel brings cool-kid glamour to an oceanfront setting in Condado. Ninety-six rooms and a beachfront pool deck mark this as a piece of St. Barts in San Juan. Rates start at \$299.

Renewed

Tucked along the Condado Lagoon, **O:live Boutique Hotel** is a chic, intimate hideaway with a stunning rooftop deck. Rates start at \$229.

Forty-five minutes outside of San Juan, all 114 rooms and the spa at the spectacular Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve have been updated. New dining options include a ceviche bar and a culinary center offering cooking classes and private dinners. Rates start at \$999.

The recently rebranded 543-suite Melia Coco Beach resort, 25 minutes from San Juan, is ready to welcome guests and golfers at its championship Tom Kite course. Rates start at \$255.

Upgrades at the St. Regis Bahia Beach, 30 minutes outside of San Juan, include a \$60 million renovation with a sleek new look by local designer Nono Maldonado. Rates start at \$599.

El San Juan Hotel, a Curio Collection by Hilton hotel, underwent a \$65 million renovation pre-hurricane, and is now freshly restored with 388 rooms, two miles of sandy beach, 16 bars and restaurants, four pools, a nightclub, and a spa. Rates start at \$192.

Coming Soon

Loisse Herger's **OLV:55**, with 26 rooms, greenery-covered balconies, a two-tiered pool deck, and a rooftop bar, is set to open in December.

Look for the **Condado Plaza Hilton** to reopen in mid-December, the **Caribe Hilton** in January 2019, and the **Ritz-Carlton San Juan** in April 2019.

Eat Here

The San Juan dining scene was among the capital's first charms to come roaring back after the hurricane. Not only are longtime favorites like **Santaella** and **Marmalade** reopened, but the city has welcomed a slew of new eateries. Here are the best bets.

San Juan's latest seafood spot, aMare, sits within the new Serafina Beach Hotel. Dishes like branzino baked in a salt crust are the perfect match for the ocean views.

Azucena fonda contemporánea features a menu with locally sourced ingredients and an outdoor deck with a vertical garden—a great spot to enjoy the hipster parade along Loiza Street.

At Comedería Fonda Urbana, try chef Xavier Pacheco's homage to traditional Puerto Rican food, with dishes such as *chicharrones* (fried pork rinds) and *pastelón*, a sweet-potato-topped shepherd's pie.

Tapas, wine, cocktails, craft beer, and live jazz lie just behind the curtain of **Gemileo**, a speakeasy within a clothing boutique and bric-a-brac shop.

Raya, celebrity chef Mario Pagan's newest restaurant, blends Caribbean flavors with Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Thai influences on the ground floor of O:LV 55 Hotel.

A newly minted James Beard award semifinalist, chef/co-owner Gabriel Hernández creates stunning vegetarian and seafood plates at Verde Mesa, a

romantic little hideaway in Old San Juan.

Vianda's sophisticated island cuisine features local ingredients on a seasonal menu that may include garbanzo bean stew with pig's trotters and green banana and cod fish with coconut, shiitake mushrooms, and chili oil.

One of Puerto Rico's most revered chefs, Wilo Benet, is behind Wilo Eatery & Bar, a lively quick-service restaurant, gourmet shop, and grab-and-go concept.

