



NEWS

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## One year after Hurricane Irma, Florida's travel industry recovers

Hurricane Irma, which hit the mainland USA on Sept. 10 last year, cost Florida \$1.5 billion in visitor spending and 1.8 million visitors.

But hotel and tourism officials say the state is rebounding.

According to [VISIT FLORIDA](#), the state's tourism bureau, an estimated 34.9 million out-of-state visitors arrived in the state in the final four months of 2017.

In June, Governor Rick Scott announced that Florida welcomed a record 33.2 million visitors in the first quarter of 2018. That is a 7.4 percent increase over the same period in 2017.

The most affected part of Florida was Monroe County, which includes Key West and the other keys in the 125-mile long island chain.

The Keys are getting new airlift. Beginning Oct. 4, [United Airlines will increase daily non-stop service from Newark Liberty International Airport to Key West from seasonal to year-round](#). During peak travel season from February through May, United will add a second daily flight. United is also increasing service from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

On Dec. 24, American Airlines will resume nonstop winter and spring service into Key West from Dallas–Fort Worth, operating daily flights through April 1.

**Hotels renovate**

Lodging inventory in the Florida Keys is just more than 90 percent operational from pre-hurricane levels, according to the [Florida Keys Tourism Council](#). Nearly all resorts that were closed by Irma are projected to be fully open before the end of 2018.

[Hawks Cay Resort](#) in Duck Key re-opened Aug. 30 after a \$50 million renovation of its lobby, restaurants, 177 guestrooms, and public areas. The resort has two new restaurants and an expanded adults-only area.

[Oceans Edge Key West Resort Hotel and Marina](#) originally opened in January 2017. The resort sustained minor damage to its 20 acres due to the hurricane. For instance, some rooms had some flooding through the front doors. Key locks had to be replaced. Carpet damaged by water caused the need to bring in tile. Some dry wall had to be removed. A hurricane plate was installed in front of each door designed to stop the impact of wind and rain.

“We were up and running by early October, but given that there was so little business coming to the Keys post-storm we took a little longer making certain that our property was maintained to the condition at which we opened a year prior,” says Tom Elwood, general manager of Oceans Edge.

That said, Elwood acknowledged that booking levels have not risen to pre-Irma levels.

“Our hotel has done much better (year over year) in occupancy post storm, but it is not where we anticipated the market to be,” he says.

He urges people to visit the Keys. “It looks better than it did pre-storm,” he says. “Any old debris has been washed away and cleaned up and particularly Key West is looking refreshed and the locals are eager to continue to welcome back tourists.”

[Cheeca Lodge and Spa](#) in Islamorada re-opened in March after a \$25 million renovation.

**The storm destroyed the resort’s 525-foot fishing pier, a symbol of Cheeca Lodge. The framework of the lodge remained structurally intact, though there was damage to sheet rock, contents of the rooms, elevators, and the data cables.**

**“Everything electrical was considered compromised,” says Bob LaCasse, general manager for Cheeca Lodge and Spa. “There’s a saying: ‘When in doubt, rip it out,’ and that’s what we did. We started from scratch.”**

**The resort now has a new lobby lounge and a new family-friendly dining concept called Mia Cucina. Later this year, an expanded oceanfront pool area and Tiki Bar named South 25 will debut. Guestrooms also have a new design.**

**LaCasse says to strengthen the property for future hurricanes, the resort's wastewater treatment plant was relocated to higher ground. Windows and sliding doors were replaced with high-impact rated materials. Outdoor air-conditioner units were raised to avoid surge intrusion.**

The Keys will also get new hotels. [Isla Bella Beach Resort](#) will debut in early 2019 in Knights Key in Marathon, at the threshold of the iconic Seven Mile Bridge.

Developed by Pritam Singh and The Singh Company's, the first full-service hotel in Marathon sits on 24 acres. It will have 199 guestrooms, a nearly one-mile private beach, a full-service spa, four dining spots, five swimming pools, a marketplace, fishing pier, and marina.

Singh says Florida has always been resilient. Since Hurricane Andrew struck in August 1992, building codes have become stricter.

"Hurricane Andrew was the pivotal event and ever since then the buildings are getting stronger and stronger," Singh says. "At some point, the damage becomes a lot less. You just run out of buildings built in the 40s, 50s and 60s. The flood insurance is kind of an urban renewal project."

Singh says developers learn from each storm. For instance, they now have better generators and satellite phones for when cell phone towers are downed. In terms of landscaping, they only use salt-tolerant plants.

"There are plants that are lovely but they are not salt-tolerant, so we're not putting them in," he says. "We're all getting smarter."

The Keys' first all- or "luxury- inclusive" adults-only resort is set to be unveiled later this year in Key Largo. Bungalows Key Largo will have 135 stand-alone units, two pools, several restaurants and bars.

Also in Key Largo, the new 200-room Baker's Cay Resort, a Curio Collection by Hilton, is scheduled to open by late fall. It's the Keys' first Curio property.

### **Attractions re-open**

All 10 Keys state parks are open for day use as restoration efforts continue.

On Big Pine Key, a new 1,840-square-foot Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges Nature Center is under construction near mile marker 30.5. When it debuts in late fall, this center will showcase the Keys' four national wildlife refuges with exhibits and a nature bookstore operated by the Florida Keys Wildlife Society.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/2018/09/07/florida-welcomes-travelers-one-year-after-hurricane-irma/1220408002/>