

Return to PARADISE

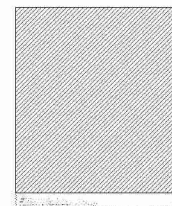
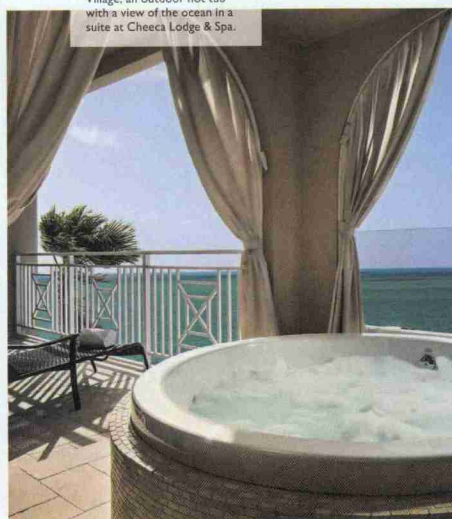
Last year Hurricane Irma wreaked havoc on Key West's tourism industry, but local hotels want travelers to know that they've sprung back... and are better than ever.

By Riki Altman-Yee & Margit Bisztray

Hurricane Irma's 130 mph winds struck the Florida Keys hard on Sept. 10, 2017, and many wondered if the beloved vacation destination would return to normal, let alone survive. But, by early spring 2018, Stacy Mitchell of the Monroe County Tourist Development Council declared more than three-quarters of the Keys' lodging facilities were back open for business, many with five-star improvements.

Some of the Keys' finest hotels were not closed for very long. **The Moorings Village** (rates from \$649 per night, 123 Beach Road, Islamorada, 305.664.4708, themooringsvillage.com), for instance, opened back up in January. Reps report most of the damage impacted the property's lush landscape, but community members pitched in to help rebuild lovely beachside gardens for its 18 villas. The Moorings' iconic dock has since been entirely rebuilt, along with the property's swimming pool. Nearby **Cheeca Lodge & Spa** (rates from \$319 per night, 81801 Overseas Highway, Islamorada, 844.993.9713, cheeca.com) was not as fortunate, as it was not able to welcome guests back until March. However, once the property's \$25 million renovation is completed this May, guests will undoubtedly be wowed by a new oceanfront pool, expanded wellness spa and redesigned lobby.

From top: A porch in the Maroni house of The Moorings Village; an outdoor hot tub with a view of the ocean in a suite at Cheeca Lodge & Spa.





largely spared Irma's wrath, including **Dolphin Point Villas** (rates from \$365 per night, 101910 Overseas Highway, Key Largo, 305.451.0315, dolphinpointvillas.com), which welcomed its first guests a month after the storm hit. The unique property comprises six contemporary retreats, the largest of which offers more than 7,300 square feet of indoor and outdoor space, and can accommodate up to 16 guests with five bedrooms, five baths and panoramic bay views.

In Key West, the charming **Hotel Marquesa** (rates from \$350 per night, 600 Fleming St., Key West, 305.292.1919, marquesa.com) managed to open its highly anticipated expansion project, Marquesa 4-1-4, one month after Irma passed through town. The 14-room addition, located less than a block away on Simonton Street, comprises three buildings centered around a swimming pool and fountain.

Also in Conch Republic, the newly built **Perry Hotel** (rates from \$289 per night, 7001 Shrimp Road, Key West, 305.296.1717, perrykeywest.com) had barely been open four months before Irma tested its grit, yet it closed only a few days in September due to evacuation notices and limited water supply. (Ownership has wisely installed a generator big enough to run the property in its entirety.) General manager Troy Talpas says he was humbled by the experience: "It's very much a community effort when something like this happens. Those that are more fortunate help those that are less so. We were able to do things like provide free lunches to local residents and relief workers during the recovery process. We were happy to do so and we know others took similar steps to help each other come out on top of this."

The message is clear: The rain is gone and the Keys are calling. ■



Clockwise from top left: The lobby of the Perry, one of Key West's newest hotels; a tranquil beach spot at Dolphin Point Villas in Key Largo; the entrance to Angler and Ale, the signature restaurant of Hawks Cay Resort in Duck Key.

Hawks Cay Resort (rates from \$339 per night, 61 Hawks Cay Blvd., Duck Key, 888.395.5539, hawkscay.com) also welcomed guests back in March, though the resort's renovation—including the main hotel—will not be completed until this summer. Until then, select villas are available and the kids activity center, restaurant, Sunset Pool and boat ramp are open. As for the property's popular dolphins? "They're just fine," says rep Holly Zawyer. "They took a long vacation up in Orlando and returned to Hawks back in December [and] they are already back to their normal routine with daily in-water and dockside programming."

Further south, **Little Palm Island Resort & Spa** (28500 Overseas Highway, Little Torch Key, 800.343.8567, littlepalmisland.com) took a much harsher beating and the couples' favorite won't reopen until next year. We've been told to expect the same five-star level of excellence when that happens, as well as some new and opulent extras.

Fortunately some new additions were