

Hurricane Irma Comes to Guavaberry

The Statistics

Date: September 6, 2017

Force: Category 5; deemed the most powerful Atlantic hurricane in history

Duration: Hurricane force winds began about 11a.m. and ended about 4:30p.m.

Wind speeds: 180mph sustained; gusts to 220 mph

Deaths: None as a direct result of the storm

Wednesday, September 6, 2017, broke grey and still on Virgin Gorda. Everyone at Guavaberry — Tina, Michelle, Ian and the staff — was as ready as they could be for the Category Three hurricane barreling down on them. Tina's two-story house, the front of which was shaped like the prow of a ship and all glass, was completely boarded up. All the Guavaberry houses had been cleared of porch furniture and anything else that could blow around. Their cars were lined up in the open field below Jasmine in a tight row, to keep them safe from falling limbs and flying debris. In fact, the preparations were so routine that Valerie flew off to Canada on vacation two days earlier, as she knew ports would be closing down imminently. Tina, Michelle and Michelle's husband, Chill, had a leisurely breakfast together that morning and tracked the hurricane with each updated report.

By eleven that morning, it was clear that Hurricane Irma had something much more dire in mind for Virgin Gorda than anything approaching a 'routine' hurricane. Changing course slightly at the last minute (the eye had been predicted to hit Anegada with an engulfing storm surge, forcing emergency evacuations) and exploding suddenly into a ferocious Category Five event, Hurricane Irma now had Virgin Gorda in its crosshairs. Irma would go down in history as the strongest storm ever recorded in the open Atlantic and the first Category Five storm to ever hit the Leeward Islands. Closer to home, on Virgin Gorda, Tina and the rest of the people on the island would eventually learn that Irma's eye was also embedded with at least seven tornadoes.

Chill (whose real name is Sherwin) delivered the first ominous news. Although Tina, Chill and Michelle, who was five months pregnant, were already putting down towels and mopping up rain water that was being driven under the boards and glass doors, it was he who noticed that the glass in the sliding doors was beginning to buckle. At one point, Michelle watched as her mother's dining room wall began to undulate. The three fled to the kitchen at the back of the house and when the wall went and the glass went and the furniture began to fly out into the yard, they fled.

Luckily, Tina's house had a basement studio. The rain was so heavy, they knew the space would

be flooded but it was, by then, their only hope of survival. Retrieving what they could — Michelle's wedding rings, cellphones, a radio, iPads, snacks and three dogs — they ran for their lives. It took all Chill's strength to open the kitchen door in order to escape. Chill and Michelle went first, followed quickly by Tina. Outside, they faced a white world. The wind was so strong by now that it shattered the rain into a veil of mist. Try as she might, Tina could not run against the wind. She was blown to a standstill. Chill was just on his way back to help her when a brief break in the wind freed her to move and she was able to reach shelter. They just made it. Tina's kitchen, their last upstairs refuge, blew out moments later. Down in the studio, they prayed for survival. The barometric pressure was so low, their ears ached and, above them, the roar was terrifying. When the eye passed over them at 12:40 p.m., they used the lull to bail out the apartment and steady themselves for what was to come. They knew the back end of a hurricane is always the most destructive.

Four hours later they heard voices. Marcel, husband of longtime Guavaberry employee Verdan, had hacked his way with a machete from the office, where he and his family sought refuge, all the way to Tina's house. What Tina saw when she and her family emerged from the basement was a scene of gut-wrenching destruction. Her home, built in 1989 and mostly of wood, was destroyed. The house was virtually gutted. Furnishings, appliances, clothing were strewn everywhere outside. Much was missing, never to be recovered. The roof peak and some areas of wall were all that was left standing.

When Tina got to the office, she was relieved to find it intact. Only a few solar panels were gone from the roof. This building would provide sanctuary not just for Tina, who would live in a back room for two years while she rebuilt the Guavaberry rental properties; but also, for Michelle and Chill, whose own apartment had been wrecked, and Marcel, Verdan and their family, whose home in the Valley was destroyed. A visiting couple who did not leave before the storm struck joined the Guavaberry clan in the office too.

Outside, green Virgin Gorda was now eerily brown. Nearly every leaf had been whipped off every tree. The stately banyan across from the office was stripped naked, its spindly branches reaching forlornly upward. Trees were toppled or uprooted. Branches were broken off. Palm trees were twisted like licorice sticks. Debris — manmade and natural — was everywhere, making it impossible to walk around but also impossible to fathom the overwhelming extent of the damage. It looked to Tina like a bomb had gone off. The Guavaberry drive up to the main road was completely blocked except for the path Marcel had forged. To reach anything involved climbing over and around piles of Irma detritus. Going down to the beach, the dip in the road was filled with about three feet of water but the blown off roof of the Guavaberry utility shed made a convenient bridge. At the beach, Tina's heart was broken all over again. The largest of the two tamarind trees was lying on its side, its sad bald branches pointing to the beach shed. But Jackson quickly deduced that the mother root was still in the ground. Saving this tree became Tina's Priority #1. In spite of the islandwide destruction, Tina and Ian would locate a backhoe and the manpower to haul the tree back into place, buttressing it with props and stabilizing it with

anchored straps. Instantly it became the symbol of Guavaberry's resiliency.

Two hours after their rescue from Tina's basement, it was dark. Very very dark. Electricity was out islandwide and would not be restored at Guavaberry until January 2018. Even though everyone was wandering around, shell-shocked, Tina and crew had a pressing need to get their generator going — there was all that food in the Commissary refrigerator! To say nothing of the need for light. But the generator failed. It would take two days before Ian could get it in working order.

Meanwhile, everyone hunkered down in the office and waited for the sun to rise on the first full day, post-Irma, at Guavaberry. They did not have far to go the next morning to begin to see the devastation. Oleander, at the top of the drive, was in ruins. Tina, armed with a yellow pad and Michele with a camera, began to assess the damage. Even so, they were not prepared for what they saw when they got to the road — Jasmine, Alamanda and Flamboyant destroyed. At Jasmine, only two walls survived — the rear exterior wall and the interior kitchen one. Despite that, all the kitchen cabinets were intact and the dishes and glassware inside were in perfect condition, as neatly arranged as if the housekeeper had just left. Alamanda was in ruins too. Flamboyant was torn apart and as if by way of an Irma signature, the mattress from the master bedroom was upright and wrapped around a porch post.

In all, nine of the twenty Guavaberry houses were beyond repair: Flamboyant, Alamanda, Jasmine, Mango, Plum, Lime Tree (where Marcel, Verdán and their two children had tried to ride out the storm), Hibiscus, Gardenia and Cashew. Only one, Banyan, survived with only minor problems. Tulip had a hole in its roof but Marcel and Verdán and their two children moved in anyway. The roof they could patch. The others all had varying degrees of repairable damage. Wherever they looked, they found tiny tableaux of normalcy: a teapot sitting properly in a kitchen cabinet stripped of its doors; a bed still made with its colorful bedspread hardly rippled; books neatly arranged on bookshelves; a microwave still perched above the hole where the stove once had been; Tina's sundresses still hangered on her closet rod; her liquor cabinet and all its bottles in perfect order; a cabinet made by Ludwig untouched.

Then began the huge task of cleaning up, finding watertight places to store what could be salvaged, assessing each house for its repair needs and prioritizing those repairs. First to be fixed, of course, were the least damaged, beginning with Bayan, followed by Casita. Tulip, Ixora, Lily and Bougainvillea would come next. The other houses were not so fortunate. In many of the these, ceiling sections, as well as walls, were gone, giving the effect of giant skylights and enormous doors. Some houses like Lime Tree were swept clean by Irma, with all the furnishings blown outside. Others, like Mango, were missing ceiling panels and sections of wall but inside a carefully crafted mound of interior debris filled the living area, probably the handiwork of one of those embedded tornadoes. Almost all of the heavily damaged houses had their remaining interior walls plastered with blown leaf bits, as if they had been creatively speckle-painted.

Pile upon pile of brush, tree limbs, furniture, wall and ceiling sections, cabinets and untold

unrecognizable fragments of who-knew-what were collected. What could be burned was burned, including virtually everything left of Tina's house. While this unearthly task loomed ahead of them, Ian fixed the generator and they feasted on all that would otherwise spoil from the Commissary fridge. People came up from the Valley to swim in lieu of a bath; Tina invited them in for a hot shower. Indeed, as the recovery effort proceeded, every Sunday afternoon people would gather at Guavaberry to commune, to swim, to share stories, to heal. For a while, even a few members of the British Police were willing to exchange an hour's work for a cup of tea.

The monumental task of taking down unstable walls, dangling porch roofs and other dangerous leftovers from Irma was overseen by Ian, while Tina considered what to do with her staff of 24. Should she let them go? Try to keep some of them on? Several had been with her for 30 or 40 years. In the end, she took a deep breath, ignored her checkbook and retained every one of them, though their job descriptions necessarily changed. Verdán, who had been in charge of laundry, joined Jackson as a gardener. Housekeepers, who had never performed these tasks before, helped in the clean-up. Some became painters; others adopted other tasks; still others showed their skills in the old art of doing laundry by hand. On a daily basis, the office would be covered in drying clothing and sheets and towels. Hanging from the porch ceiling, covering cars, draped over bushes. They worked as team, Tina, Michelle, Ian, Chill and all the staff, as they never had before. They were in this together.

This camaraderie helped everyone survive the communications blackout that kept them all from contacting or being contacted by off-island family and friends. For weeks there was no way to let anyone on the outside world know their fate. It was three weeks before Valerie could get through to Tina to learn that there were no human casualties at Guavaberry, and that was by satellite phone. The communication blackout, however, had the far more worrisome effect of keeping everyone in the dark about Hurricane Jose and then Hurricane Maria, which followed Irma respectively in the weeks to come. Tina would learn at town meetings that they were coming but virtually nothing more — nothing certain about the track of these storms or their intensity. In the end, Jose would slide past, but Maria would be a major rain event, soaking what was exposed, including burn piles, and adding serious insult to injury.

Eventually, Virgin Gorda's telephone company, Flow, got an internet connection operating at their office opposite the Police Station. Michelle would drive up there and sit in the car with her iPad, Tina's mini iPad and her phone, contacting clients, friends and families. It was the first, rudimentary restoration of Guavaberry 'business.'

Once communications began to limp back into place, Ian started to work researching pre-fab housing companies on mainland America. Pre-fabs had several advantages. Guavaberry would not need to compete with other VG locals for the same finite supply of materials. The second advantage to pre-fab restoration was speed and also efficiency. Once on island, the shell of a house could be in place in three weeks. Then Ian would oversee the wiring and plumbing of each unit.

In November, Tina and Ian set off for America to research two pre-fab housing companies. They never got to the second one. Deltec Homes in Asheville, N.C. not only had pre-fab round houses that bore a striking resemblance to the old Guavaberry houses, but they were also hurricane resistant. Deltec built its reputation on dwellings that could — and do — stand up to winds of 200+mph. Tina ordered the first six houses, which would begin to arrive at Guavaberry in 40-foot containers, in February 2018. The first phase of rebuilding began with Jasmine, followed by Hibiscus, Mango, Cashew, Alamanda and finally Flamboyant was completed in January 2019. The three remaining houses to be rebuilt —Gardenia, Mango and Plum Tree — would have to wait for Phase II of the restoration during the summer of 2019.

While workmen would be in short supply elsewhere on Virgin Gorda, Tina was blessed with loyal construction crews who were there for her the moment she asked. They poured concrete for the cisterns and slabs, made repairs and helped erect the pre-fab houses when they arrived. Finally, kitchen cabinets were ordered from Canada, tiles and rattan furnishings were found in the U.S. By October 2018, Guavaberry was prepared to take reservations for the 2019-20 winter vacation season.

Behind the long haul back to viability at Guavaberry Vacation Homes were some very real personal dramas. Michelle's baby was due in January 2018. Everyone was urging her to leave the island, to go to relatives in Canada or friends in the U.K., especially as commercial transportation between Virgin Gorda and Tortola was limited for months. Instead, she fought to stay on Virgin Gorda and would deliver her son Connor safely in Tortola on January 6, 2018.

Ian, who had never been in a hurricane before, had no idea what he was in for. Caught up in the excitement of pre-storm preparations, he laid in lots of beer where he was housesitting at Crooks Bay and, in happy, naïve anticipation, prepared to party with Tina's older daughter Christine and her husband David. During the eye, he went outside to look around and take some pictures. From where he was, facing the Atlantic, in a well-built house far from any neighbors, it was not immediately obvious to him that anything much had happened. He would not learn the extent of the devastation across the island until the next day.

For Tina, September 6, 2017 will go down as one of worst days of her life. She lost both her home and her business in one fell swoop. But she acknowledges that everyone at Guavaberry and across the island also took away a valuable lesson from Irma — that they are made of sterner stuff than they knew. And, Tina being Tina, embraces the silver linings — a healthy baby grandson and the biggest blessing of all, that Irma occurred during the day and not at night. Had it occurred after the island was asleep, almost certainly there would have been fatalities. Irma did not steal a single life on Virgin Gorda that day.

— *by Kate Stout*

Hurricane Irma and Guavaberry — Timeline

Sept 6, 2017 —

11 a.m.: Hurricane Irma makes landfall on Virgin Gorda as a Force 5 storm 12:40

p.m.: The eye of the hurricane passes over

4:30 p.m.: Tina, Michelle, Chill and the dogs rescued

Sept 8, 2017 — Generator fixed and working

Sept 29, 2017 — Flow internet restored at the telephone company

Sept- Nov, 2017 — Recovery and clean up

Nov 16, 2017 — Tina and Ian travel to Deltec Homes in Asheville, N.C.; order six pre-fab houses

Nov 17, 2017 — Michelle begins a weekly blog — guavabelieveit@wordpress.com

Jan 18, 2018 — Electricity restored to Guavaberry

Feb 18, 2018 – Phase I construction begins with Jasmine

Winter 2018-19 — Guavaberry welcomes guests again

Jan 31, 2019 — Phase I construction completed

Summer 2019 — Phase II construction begins