

A Year After Irma, Anguilla is Back in Business

One of the most beautiful resort destinations in the Caribbean has bounced back in the year since Irma — and there's never been a better time to visit. Here's what Anguilla's like now, plus what to do once you're there.

By Jacqueline Gifford

September 07, 2018



MACDUFF EVERTON/GETTY IMAGES

At Sunshine Shack, one of the most popular beach bars on Anguilla, the uniform for tourists and staffers is pretty much the same: t-shirt, shorts, flip-flops. It's the ultimate equalizer, putting everyone in a carefree mood.

On a hot, cloudless August afternoon, I was wearing my uniform, and Garvey Lake, the charismatic owner of Sunshine Shack, was wearing his. We were standing side by side, looking out at the aquamarine waters of Rendezvous Bay, a crescent of powder white

sand that's as fine as any on Anguilla—a Caribbean island with 32 other beaches to spare. Lake then motioned for me to look at the ground. “Put your hands up like this, baby,” he said, taking his hands and cupping them around his eyes to form a mask. He peered down at the sand. “That’s all I had left.”

On September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma blew through Anguilla as a Category 5 storm, severely damaging homes, hotels, and restaurants, including Sunshine Shack, where not one piece of wood was left. On an island that heavily relies on travel and tourism — it contributed 61.6 percent to Anguilla’s GDP in 2017 — the impact was immediate and devastating.

Lake knew that for him, the quickest way to recovery was to just start building. Three weeks after Irma, he went over to Coconuts, a neighboring bar on Rendezvous Bay, to help them pick up the pieces. He then turned to his own restaurant in November. “I had employees to feed, and they had families to feed,” he told me. On January 10, Sunshine Shack was back with its outdoor grill, shaded picnic tables, and license-plate-festooned main house, serving up grilled ribs and fries as if nothing had ever happened.

Except everything had happened.

My husband and I first visited Anguilla in 2007. On that vacation we rented a car and drove around asking ourselves two pressing questions: what beach would we hit up, and where would we get our grilled spiny lobster for lunch? Post-Irma, we were eager to return with our young son as a show of support. We were also curious to see how things looked. I had heard from friends that the roads were fine and restaurants were up and running, but nothing compares to first-hand knowledge.

Here’s what we saw: some homes under construction or in disrepair, and a couple of churches without roofs. The lamp poles outside the bank were tilted at an unnatural, 60-degree angle. One night, we passed a makeshift barbershop, where a group of men huddled under an illuminated tent to get their shaves and cuts.

These were the visual reminders of Irma, but conversations revealed more. Locals were honest about how hard it was to survive without power in the most humid of seasons. One taxi driver told us his extended family in the U.K. wanted him to move there, but he couldn’t bear to leave his aging mother behind. Anguilla was where he was born and where he would stay.

Many people were frank about how good it feels to have tourists back. And let me be clear: tourists are back, the roads are fine, and you can beach hop at your leisure. Ninety percent of the restaurants are open. One Sunday afternoon, my family and I drove to DaVida, a casual spot on Crocus Bay, yet another great beach. Anguillans and out-of-towners had gathered to hear 12th Avenue, a popular local band, belt out Top 40 hits. Every seat was taken, unless its occupant was on the dance floor. On a breezy Tuesday night at Straw Hat, one of Anguilla's best restaurants, locals were at the bar watching cricket on TV, while resort guests kept streaming in to the newly rebuilt, open-air space for a lobster dinner.

One look at neighboring St. Maarten — where the airport lounge is now under an air-conditioned tent, and broken yachts lay rotting and rusting in the shallows — gives you a glimpse of just how far Anguilla has come. It's even ready to welcome the most high-profile of guests (LeBron James had been shortly before our trip) and the island feels alive, not abandoned.

Most of the major hotels are open, including Zemi Beach House, set on Shoal Bay East, and the Four Seasons, which straddles Meads and Barnes Bay. Both were welcoming guests as of this spring. Pulling into the Four Seasons, the immaculate, palm-tree-lined drive was a contrast to Anguilla's arid, scrubby interior. (Things grow fast in the Caribbean — one welcome side effect of location.) The resort was busy: well-behaved families took over the buzzy Sunset Lounge, with its soaring 18-foot ceiling and sweeping views of Barnes Bay, for early sushi dinners. Honeymooners would gravitate to the adults-only pool. At Meads Bay, the wider of the two beaches (and our son's preferred spot, thanks to the glorious waves), the service was on-point. Nobody is missing a beat.

That is in no small part due to on-the-ground relief efforts. Josephine Gumbs Connor, the owner of ViewFort Estate, a luxury villa, established the Pure Anguilla Foundation to help local children and families with food, shelter, and needed supplies. The Foundation has partnered with UNICEF on a "Return to Happiness" program, to help Anguillan children process the trauma of the storm.

Shortly after Irma, Barry Sternlicht's Starwood Capital Group, which owns the Four Seasons Anguilla, joined forces with three other properties — Belmond Cap Juluca,

Zemi Beach House, and Malliouhana, an Auberge Resort, which sadly remains closed — to form the relief fund Anguilla Stronger. Anguilla has a high repeat visitor rate, and within days of Irma making landfall, many people wanted to give back. To date, the fund has raised \$1.83 million toward building materials and food. Each week, nearly 600 employees from the four properties come to collect staples including household and hygiene supplies (soap, shampoo). Aid is also regularly distributed to senior citizens in the community.

Related: [As the Caribbean Rebuilds, Now Is an Important Time to Visit \(Video\)](#)

But the island is also drawing new visitors who want to help. When I spoke with Paulo Paias, the General Manager of Zemi Beach House, he told me that some 80 percent of Zemi's guests this year are first-timers. The hotel suffered minimal damage, and its gorgeous spa — set in cluster of 300-year-old wooden tea houses flown in from Thailand — made it through just fine. The scene here was just as lively: there was a multi-generational group from the American South, a Canadian family with their two young boys, an Italian party enjoying the long August holiday. The staff kept everyone hydrated and happy with cocktails by the pool. Perhaps the best sign of any good vacation, I found myself wanting to do nothing but eat — the incredible Jonny Cakes for breakfast, the perfectly salted house chips at lunch, the local goat curry at the barbecue.

I didn't know quite what to expect on Anguilla. Do you talk about the storm, or pretend it never happened? Ask questions, or leave the topic alone? There's a certain amount of guilt one feels, as a tourist, going to a destination that has been through a natural disaster. What can you really do to help? Well, you help by being there. I now understand why Anguilla has its loyalists, and will continue to do so post-Irma: This is an island that welcomes exploration, that encourages you to find a hidden beach or a simple seafood shack, to talk to the locals, to get outside your comfort zone. And those rhythms will never change.

Getting There

There are two popular options. One is to fly into Princess Juliana International Airport in St. Maarten, serviced by major airlines including Delta, Jet Blue, and American, and then take either the public ferry or a private boat charter over to Blowing Point, Anguilla. Calypso Charters and Fun Time are two reliable charter companies.

Alternatively, travelers can fly to Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and connect to Anguilla on Seaborne Airlines. As of my early August visit, the airport in St. Maarten was still not ready to handle the number of visitors it did pre-hurricane. Customs and passport control took place under an air-conditioned tent. But the five-minute taxi transfer to the boat terminal was seamless, and the 30-minute boat ride itself stress-free.

Getting Around

If you want to stay put at your hotel, we wouldn't blame you. But — and this is a big but — you'd be missing out on exploring one of the Caribbean's best islands for beaches. A rental car is essential to do so. Richardson Car Rental has a fleet of mid-size cars and SUVs. Anguilla's roads are flat and very easy to navigate; driving is on the left-hand side, though the driver side seat is the same as it is in the United States.

Taxis are also widely available, and the drivers are universally friendly. The rides are priced out by ten zones, and can be as little as \$10 one-way if you are traveling within the same zone, or as much as \$36 one-way if you are going between zone one (on the West End) and zone ten (on the East End). There is an additional surcharge of \$5 per additional passenger, beyond the first two.

Related: [Caribbean Hotels Reopening With Major Upgrades in 2018 \(Video\)](#)

Where to Stay

Anguilla has some of the most luxurious hotels and resorts in the entire Caribbean, and they regularly place on our list of readers' favorites in the region. Below are a handful of the top places to stay.

Frangipani Beach Resort

A boutique hotel perfectly positioned in the middle of Meads Bay, [Frangipani](#) was voted the No. 1 property in the Caribbean, Bermuda, and the Bahamas by Travel + Leisure readers in our 2018 World's Best Awards. What catapulted it to the top? Many of our readers wrote in to say that they enjoyed getting to know the friendly owners, Scott and

Shannon Kircher, who are there nearly every day to assist with guests needs. Other pluses: with its charming Spanish tiles and flowering frangipani, the property feels more like a home than a resort; you have access to kayaks and Hobie Cats right off-shore; and the small pool is the perfect place to cool off if swimming in the ocean isn't your thing. From \$700.

Four Seasons Resort & Private Residences Anguilla

The Four Seasons, voted No. 12 in the region by T+L readers in our 2018 World's Best Awards, sits between two beaches: Meads and Barnes Bay. The sleek décor (think marble walls and floors, brass fixtures, and driftwood tables) comes courtesy of Kelly Wearstler, who decorated the property when it debuted years back as a Viceroy. The property has aged well, and now that Four Seasons has taken over, a fantastic kids club has been added, and the team is especially attentive to young children. (A glass of apple juice was waiting for our toddler at check-in.) Beyond the attentive service, food is a major selling point: the kitchen knows how to do everything from simple pizzas and a crab sandwich on fresh Johnny cakes to elaborate platters of sushi and seared rib-eye steak. (From \$950.)

Zemi Beach House

Ranked No. 15 in the region in Travel + Leisure's 2018 World's Best Awards, this relative newcomer first opened in 2016, and quickly began to earn a loyal fan base thanks to its prime location on Shoal Bay East — one of Anguilla's best beaches — and its modern décor, which blends island colors with furniture and decorations from Asia. Though the resort has only 65 rooms, there are a slew of amenities that make it feel much larger: two pools, multiple restaurants, a fancy rum bar, a shop, a tennis court, and a kids club. One of the highlights is the spa, set in centuries-old teahouses and a rice barn imported from Thailand. It is a must: you can indulge in everything from a grapefruit and rosemary muscle melt to a guarana and green tea body wrap, and spend extra time soaking in the vitality pool. (From \$730.)

Belmond Cap Juluca

Poised to reopen in November after a \$121 million overhaul, this iconic property runs the entire length of Maundays Bay, arguably Anguilla's best beach. Belmond is keeping the hotel's white, Moorish-inspired villas, which dot the shoreline; the interior rooms,

however, are being entirely overhauled. A Peruvian restaurant and Cips, an Italian spot from the Cipriani family of restaurants, is also in the works. (From \$725.)

ViewFort Estate

The island has many villas to rent, ideal for families or large groups celebrating a milestone birthday or anniversary. One of the more unique properties is [ViewFort](#), located on Anguilla's highest point. It encompasses part of a 200-year-old home, but has grown to include nine bedrooms, each with their own color scheme and vibe. Some are in the main house (which has a huge kitchen, dining area, and well-stocked library), while others lie near the swimming pool, still others off of the terraced grounds. Rates include a full staff (butlers, private chef, babysitters), all day snacks and cocktail service, and a shuttle service to nearby Crocus Bay, among many other inclusions. Visitors can also go hiking and caving at the 80-acre Katouche Estate, owned by the same family that has View Fort. (From \$15,983.)

Where to Eat

The dining scene on Anguilla ranges from the super-casual to the formal. You'll want to make reservations in advance, particularly if you are traveling during the high season. Most restaurants also include 15% tax and service in the bill, and give guests the option of tipping extra. Here are a handful of favorites.

Breezes Beachfront Restaurant and Bar

This laid-back, open-air restaurant, part of the Reef by Cuisinart Resort, sits on Merrywing Bay and has lovely views of neighboring St. Maarten. There are couches on the wooden deck, great for lounging and sharing one of the excellent pizzas, and a scattering of tables under a protected awning. We suggest going just before sunset, as the lights across the sea begin to twinkle. (Entrées \$19-\$41.)

Falcon Nest Bar & Grill

If you're craving a toes-in-the-sand experience, nothing beats [this tiny restaurant](#) on the East End in Island Harbour. The menu is simple — grilled chicken, BBQ ribs, fish fry — but priced right and delicious. Main courses come with your choice of two sides: cole

slaw, salad, fries, and rice and peas. The lobster is caught just offshore (you can see the fishermen's boats that line the bay) and it was the most tender we had on our trip. 264-491-1127. (Entrées \$13-\$40.)

Picante

Anguilla's first and only Mexican restaurant, this open-air spot is still going strong on the West End thanks to its potent margaritas, flavorful guacamole, and tender steak fajitas. It is a great place to go with kids or a big group for a celebration, since the atmosphere is fun and casual: you can sit at the bar or on one of the long picnic tables and easily while away the evening. (264-198-1616; entrées \$10-\$25.)

Straw Hat

This family-run restaurant, an Anguilla mainstay for fine European-influenced dining, now occupies an airy, oceanfront space in the Frangipani Beach Resort. Though it is open for breakfast and lunch, we suggest booking in for dinner to take advantage of the sunset views. Order the local pumpkin agnolotti, followed by the grilled Anguillan lobster or sweet crayfish. (Entrées \$26-\$53.)

Sunshine Shack

This is your quintessential, laid-back Caribbean beach bar. Garvey Lake's red, yellow, and green-painted restaurant occupies a prime stretch of Rendezvous Bay, so come wearing your swimsuit and armed with towels. After a lunch of ribs and fries, you can take a quick swim, play a game of cornhole, and have a rum punch for dessert. (264-476-0649; entrées \$10-\$25.)

Veya

A go-to for date night, given the romantic, treehouse-like setting and live music that plays most evenings. Chef Carrie Bogar picked up and moved to Anguilla over ten years ago, and has built a stellar reputation by mixing island ingredients with Moroccan spices and Asian flavors — it's a multi-culti-mashup that somehow works. Order the Vietnamese-style calamari with nouc cham, followed by the Korean BBQ pork tenderloin or tamarind glazed roast chicken. (Entrées \$40-\$60.)

Though dinner is served in a more formal main house, we think lunch is your best bet, since you'll be able to pack a bathing suit and swim in gorgeous Crocus Bay before or after your meal. On Sunday, popular bands come into play. Dishes are reliable, hearty classics like grilled fish with creole sauce, lobster, burgers, and pizza. (Entrées \$20-\$50.)

What to Do/Activities

Again, you could stay put at your hotel — but its worth exploring the island, whether on land or by sea.

Boating

It's important to get out on the water and see the destination from a new perspective. Companies like Calypso Charters offer half-day trips that circumvent Anguilla, but also visit smaller, uninhabited spits of sand like Dog Island and Prickly Pear Island. Rates range from \$120 for a semi-private excursion to \$600 for a private excursion. Tradition Sailing Charters offers two-and-a-half hour sunset sails (\$175 per person) that include champagne cocktails, cheese, and charcuterie.

Horseback riding

Seaside Stables Anguilla offers hour-long horseback riding sessions along Cove Bay, an 80-acre park.

Shopping

There are several groceries stores (Best Buy, Albert Lake's) where you can stock up on beach essentials and food. We also bought fine French champagne at Grands Vins de France, a small but well-stocked wine shop in South Hill. (264-497-6498.)

Swimming and snorkeling

Anguilla has 33 beautiful beaches, each with a different charm, all with glistening white sand and aquamarine waters. If you are not staying at Zemi Beach House, rent a chair

from one of the many restaurants near the main entrance of Shoal Bay East, which has unbeatable snorkeling. Shoal Bay West, on the other end of the island, has no beach facilities, so pack a picnic lunch before you go.

Half-mile long Savannah Bay (also called Junks Hole Bay) is also known for snorkeling; a small reef protects the beach. Here, there is one restaurant: Palm Grove Bar & Grill (entrées \$12-\$55). For the ultimate cast away experience, visit Little Bay, accessibly only by boat or by shimmying down a rope slung over a cliff. Island Harbour is also a must-visit — not for the swimming, but rather for the great beach bars like Falcon Nest.

Meads Bay, home to the Four Seasons, Frangipani, and Malliouhana, is a two-mile long beach that has great waves. There are also several restaurants there (Waves, Ocean Echo) should you just want to drop by for lunch.